

>>>>> **CELTICS-LAKERS:** As good as the good old days? <<<<<

SEE A DIFFERENT GAME

Sporting News



The grades are in

NFL OFFSEASON REPORT CARD

How'd your team do? Page 28

Alan Faneca and the Jets' offensive line

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Week of June 9, 2008



New York Jets

GRADE: **A**

NEW

York, New York

Can the Jets join the Giants
at the top of the heap?



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THIS WEEK

> **NBA FINALS**

10 Then and now

It has been 21 years since the Lakers and Celtics last met in The Finals. Times sure have changed.
By Stan McNeal

> **NHL: STANLEY CUP FINALS**

18 The big stage

The young Penguins say the quality of their opponents is responsible for a rough start in the Stanley Cup finals. Outsiders point to the Red Wings' huge experience advantage. Maybe it's a combination of both. *By Dave Molinari*

> **BASEBALL**

22 What's the deal with the Angels?

They're a team about nothing fancy, but by paying attention to the little things, they've quietly developed into perennial contenders.
By Ryan Fagan

**COVER
STORY**

> **NFL OFFSEASON REPORT CARD**

28 The grades are in

The usual teacher's pets slacked off a bit, but the Eagles got the gold star and the Jets and Vikings moved to the head of the class. *By Dennis Dillon*

32 Refueling the Jets

If the team's offense—particularly its disappointing ground game—is going to take off in 2008, veteran line imports Alan Faneca and Damien Woody will have to lead the way.
By Dennis Dillon

36 Better together

The Jaguars needed to upgrade their secondary, and Drayton Florence needed a new start. This free-agent marriage could go a long way toward shifting the balance of power in the AFC.
By Clifton Brown

KNOW IT ALL

- 4 To Know List** Three reasons Tiger won't win the U.S. Open.
- 7 On Deck** Teeing off at the second major and title hunting in the NBA. Plus, **Bob Hille's Starting 5.**
- 8 Your Turn** Getting emotional with the Yankees and more dirty jobs.
- 9 Big shoes to fill** Under Armour has made a foray into cross-trainers, with mixed results.

INSIDER

- 38 ■ BASEBALL**
- 44 ■ NFL**
- 50 ■ COLLEGE FOOTBALL**
- 52 ■ COLLEGE BASKETBALL**
- 53 ■ NASCAR**
- +**
- 56 EXPOSURE**

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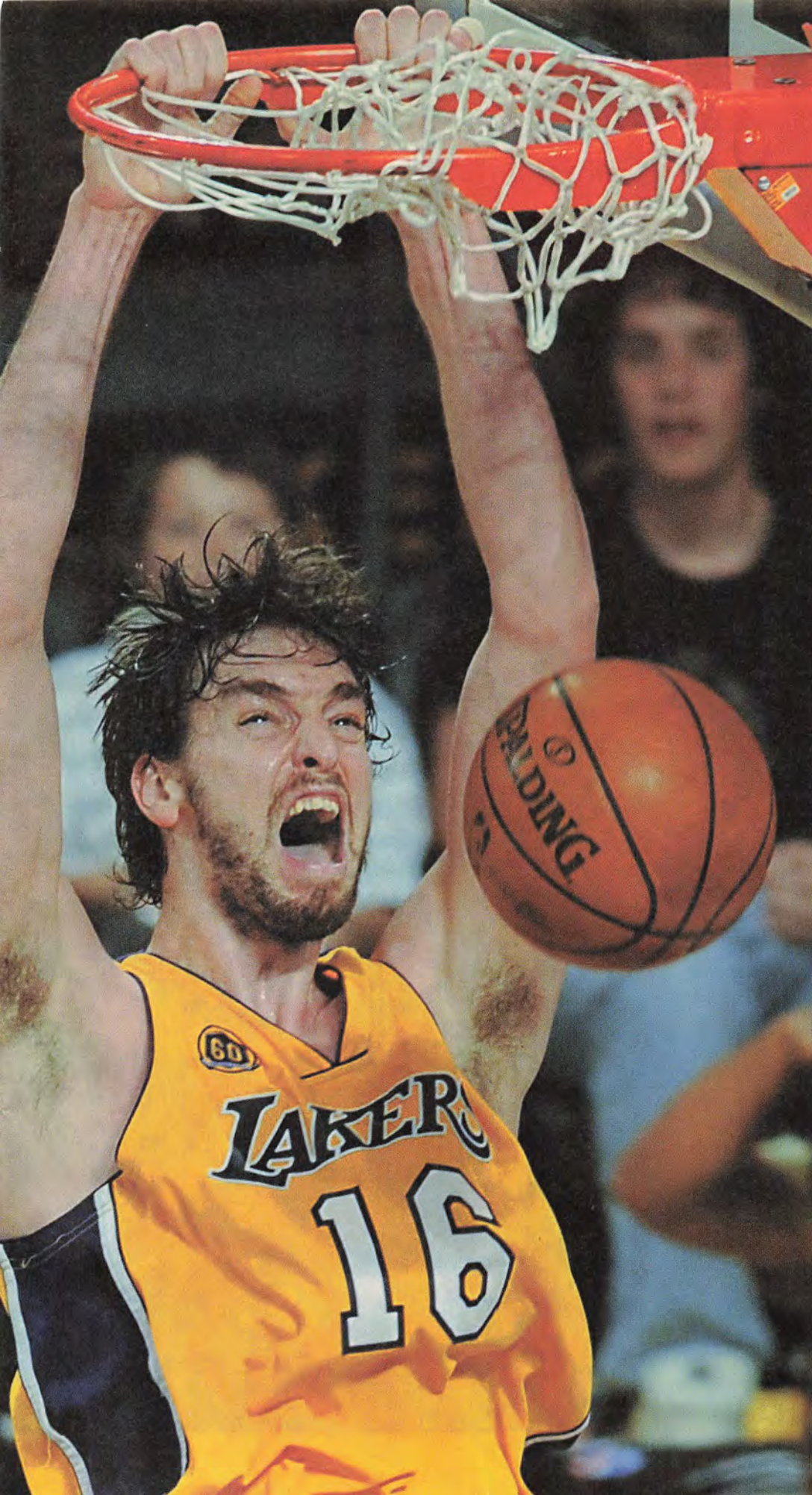
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10

Pau Gasol will make sure the Celtics don't just worry about Kobe.



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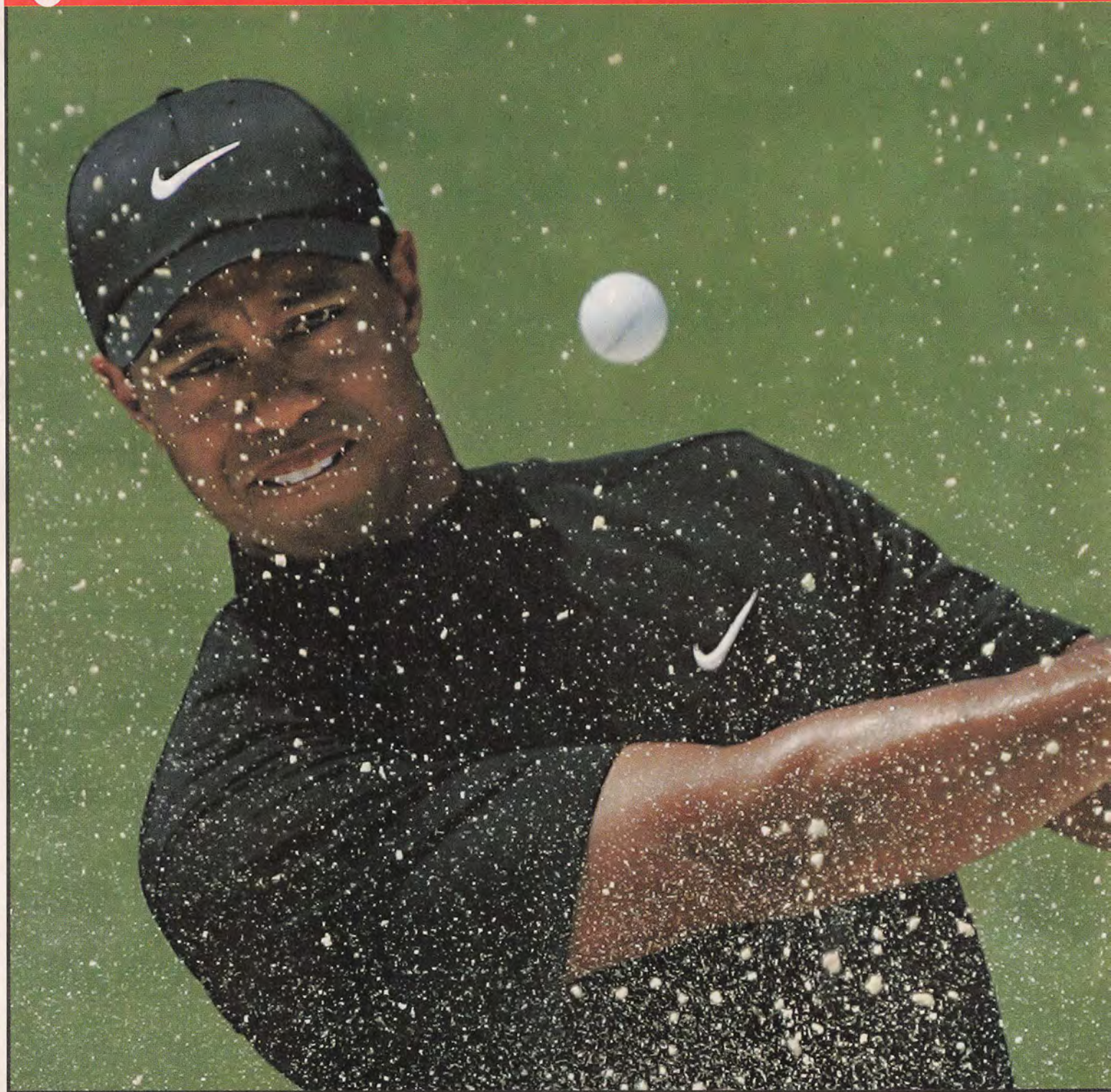
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KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL

TO **KNOW** LIST

6 things to make you an INSTANT EXPERT this week



1

THE MAIN EVENT

Hey, Tiger—look out for that left hook

Tiger Woods has won six tournaments—including four in a row—as a professional at San Diego's Torrey Pines Golf Course. He took the Buick Invitational there in January by a preposterous eight strokes. With the U.S. Open starting next Thursday at Torrey Pines... well, why are they even bothering to play this thing? Just hand the trophy to Woods right now.

But we jest. Three big reasons the best player ever will be up against it in the year's second major:

■ The USGA will get its hooks into the severely long South Course, do the usual dirty deeds to add bounce to the fairways and grisly length to the rough and force Woods to not only use his driver regularly (he hates that) but hit it straight off the tee (his biggest weakness by far).

■ Four days of scrambling with his second shots won't be easy on a guy who will be playing his first tournament golf in two months following surgery on his left knee. Under similar circumstances in the past, Woods required several

rounds to really get things going again.

■ Tiger hasn't won a U.S. Open since 2002 and has only two Open victories in 11 career starts. It has been the toughest major for him and the least predictable major overall, with the past two winners—Angel Cabrera in 2007 and Geoff Ogilvy in 2006—finishing 5-over.

There's also the Phil Mickelson factor. Mickelson won two weeks ago at the Colonial, where he drove the ball remarkably long and straight. He's a four-time U.S. Open runner-up and has won three Buick Invitational at Torrey Pines—which happens to be the muni course where the San Diego native learned to play the game.

Many a Tiger-vs.-Phil contrivance has been

foisted upon the masses before, but this one is legit. Not only because Mickelson shapes up as a worthy challenger but because Woods—who also knocked around Torrey Pines countless times as a kid—never has appeared more vulnerable. —Steve Greenberg



There's no place like home for San Diego native Mickelson.

Woods finally returns from knee surgery ... but will he be able to shake off the rust?

2

QUICK CLICKS

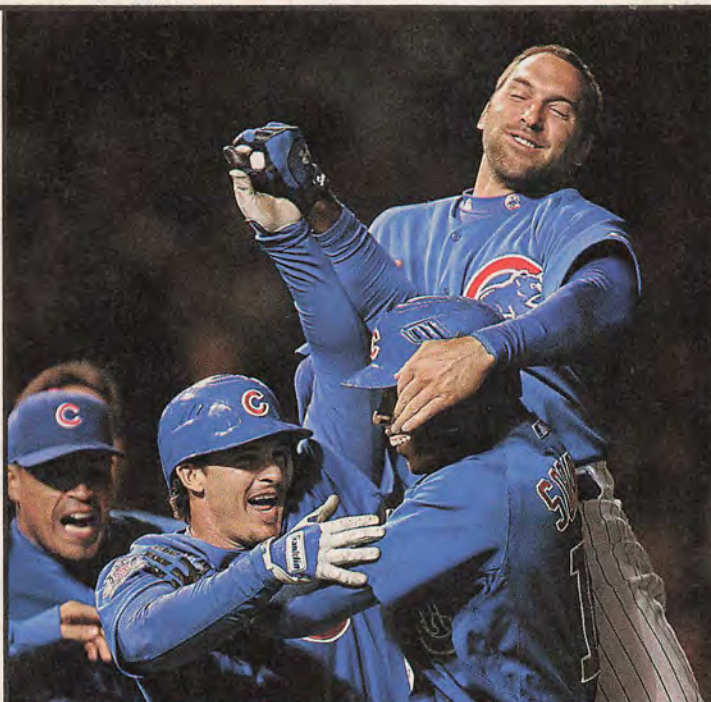
Design school

Although Converse's Chuck Taylor basketball shoes haven't stood up as performance shoes against the new guys, they're iconic—and now you've got a chance to make them your own. Converse and Jazz forward Kyle Korver are teaming up with Eastbay for a design contest that will culminate with one original design for sale on the site in January 2009. Download your blank canvas at mychucks.eastbay.com and put that creative muse to work—the entry deadline is Sunday. —Chris Littmann

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

3 157 percent

The ratings jump for Game 1 of the Stanley Cup finals from last year to this year. Sid is one popular kid (though the Red Wings might have something to do with it, too): Through four games, this year's matchup was the highest-rated Stanley Cup finals since Detroit played Carolina in 2002.



Call them lovable, but don't call them losers: The Cubs have piled up wins faster than they have at any other time in the past century.

4

IN THE SPOTLIGHT: THE CUBS

It'll mess with your head

On the last Wednesday in May, a walkoff winner for the Cubs at Wrigley Field evened their 118-year-old series record vs. the Dodgers at a mind-bogglingly improbable 1,010-1,010.

Four days later, the Cubs took the boggled minds of their hopelessly devoted followers, cracked them open and fried them up like brains on drugs. What happened? They entered June with the best record in all of baseball.

For the first time in precisely 100 years.

Go ahead, do some quick math: Have you arrived at 1908 yet? And have you grasped the significance of it?

That's correct: We are completely nuts.

Nuts because we—along with millions of Cubs fans—suddenly are entertaining the possibility that this, the 100th season since the team's last World Series championship, could be the year the most heartbreakingly infamous streak in sports goes sunny side up. —S.G.

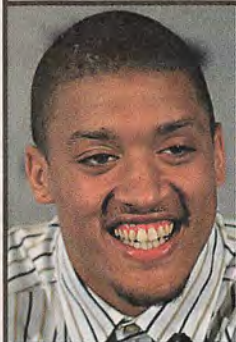
5

SPORTS BUSINESS

The A team

The NBA, as surely we all know by now, is where amazing happens—and it's also where diversity happens, according to a report released last week. The NBA received the first "A" ever by a men's sports league, thanks in part to its seven black team presidents and CEOs—most in men's pro sports history—and 12 black head coaches, also the highest percentage in pro sports. The league also was praised for its high ratio of women (41 percent of professional employees in the league office, for example, are female) and other minorities in the report issued annually by Richard Lapchick, the head of Central Florida's Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport.

Celtics coach Doc Rivers is making his first trip to The Finals.



6

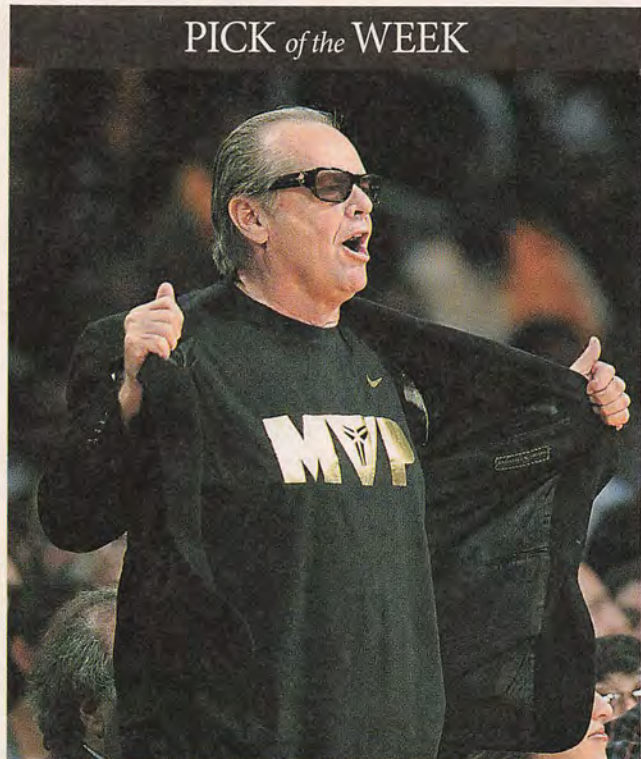
IT BEARS REPEATING

'I just turned 19 years old in January. How mature do you want me to be? Do you want me to act 25? 30? 40? I'm a kid. I'm going to live my life. I'm going to mess up. I hear a lot about character issues. But I've yet to hear what those character issues are. Until I hear somebody tell me, I don't feel the need to change.'

—Possible No. 1 overall NBA draft pick Michael Beasley to the Miami Herald

The week ahead in sports

PICK *of the* WEEK

**TUE 10**

Guess we all know which team Jack Nicholson is cheering for in The Finals.

NBA Finals, Game 3 (9 p.m., ABC). Any courtside-sitting, shades-wearing fan would tell you a championship game in Lakerland simply has to be on your bucket list. It is, after all, as good as it gets. Unless Kobe Bryant can't outperform a few good Eastern Conference men all by himself, in which case the Lakers might soon join the ranks of the departed.

SUN 8 Cubs at Dodgers

(8 p.m., ESPN). Whatever you do, don't make the same mistake as L.A.'s late-arriving fans and miss any titanic battles between Cubs left fielder Alfonso Soriano and the early-evening sun.

WED 11 *Back Nine at*

Cherry Hills: The Legends of the 1960 U.S. Open (10 p.m., HBO). The cable giant's latest sports documentary—its first on golf—recalls the explosive coming-together of Ben Hogan, Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus on the final day at Cherry Hills Country Club in suburban Denver. It was old school vs. new school vs. newer school, long before Tiger school rendered everything else meaningless.

THU 12 U.S. Open.

first round (3 p.m., NBC). San Diego's Torrey Pines is **Phil Mickelson** country, which gives Lefty a leg up on the field. And nobody does crazier stuff with a leg up—or down, for that matter—than Lefty.

—Steve Greenberg

BOB HILLE'S STARTING 5

1 The Lakers. They've played so well, even their most Hollywood-jaded fans have looked surprised. But maybe that's just the Botox talking.

2 **Baseball's draft.** The buzzword in major league front offices is *signability*. So I'm tinkering with a new invention: a radar gun for scouts that detects Scott Boras.

3 Josh Hamilton. Some season he's having. I've got to be honest, though, when he landed with the Rangers I thought it was a huge mistake. I mean, hasn't the kid had to overcome enough?

4 The Mariners. Man, has their season been a huge disappointment. It's so bad, city officials have lobbed a call in to Oklahoma City to see if they're interested.

5 Pacman Jones. Did you see who piped up on his behalf? Tank Johnson. Who knows if that helps with any reinstatement decisions, but sales of Cowboys-logged "I'm with stupid" T-shirts are through the roof.

MARK J. TERRILL / AP

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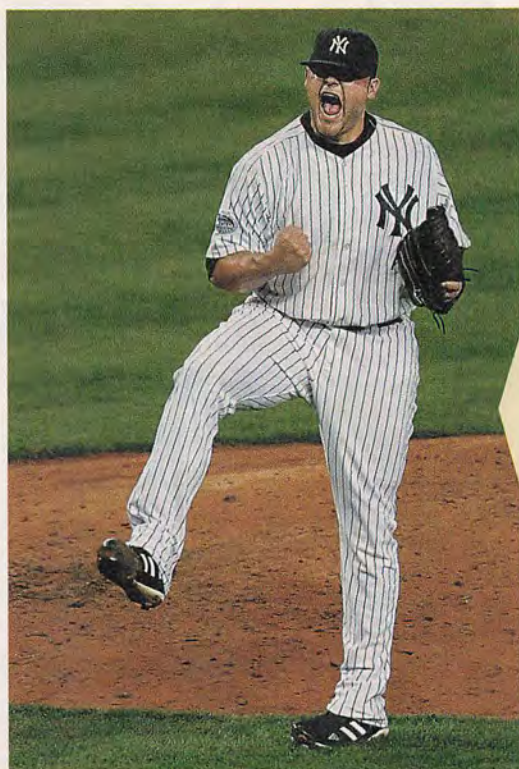
YOUR TURN

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BLOG ON

From your blogs on sportingnews.com

The day that Bud Selig agrees to instant replay is the day that pigs fly, KISS reunites and Rosie O'Donnell is let back on *The View*. —*deepvoicematt via e-mail*



■ I never even imagined obscure jobs (SN, May 26) such as an NHL dentist, mascot handler and those involved in field prep and care, so it was a great idea to identify them and give them proper recognition. Thanks for the interesting read! —*Brian Hayes via e-mail*

■ Can major league baseball clubs not afford a garbage can for their dugouts? Is it too much trouble for a healthy, grown man to get up and throw a cup in a garbage can, as opposed to being a slob and throwing it on the ground for someone else to clean up? How pampered do these men need to be? —*Rocco Pallotto, Lewistown, Pa.*

■ Nice article on Raja Bell. In it, I found the answer to why the Suns always lose to the Spurs: a mandate from the coaching staff to force the lefthanded Manu Ginobili left. Are you serious? —*Marcus Blackwell, Moreno Valley, Calif.*

■ So everyone gets upset that **Joba Chamberlain** gets emotional when pitching (SN, May 26)? Maybe if the rest of the Yankees played with so much emotion, their season would be going better. —*Pcell11 via SportingNews.com*

■ I would love to see the age minimum go up (SN, May 26), but I think the bigger issue is no true minor league system in the NBA. Baseball players have been drafted out of high school forever—if the NBA had a true minor league system in place, these players who really have no desire for college would have an option. —*wiltfongjr via SportingNews.com*

RE: CRYING FOUL

Posted by *dougvantyle*

I've been a sports official for nearly 30 years, and I understand a couple of things. First, I don't want to affect the outcome of a game. Second, what happened previously in the game should have no effect on what happens in the end.

Then I hear this: "Oh, well—the Spurs got the calls the entire game, so they shouldn't cry that Brent Barry was fouled." That has absolutely nothing to do with whether a foul should be called. If it was a foul, it was a foul. It's not the official's fault if the correct call affects the outcome of a game. Get over it. I understand the Lakers got jobbed on the previous play, but it has absolutely nothing to do with the next play. In my opinion, Barry got fouled.

RE: A GOOD MOVE

Posted by *bernieclemente*

The Cubs should sign Kenny Lofton. All season, they have been looking for another lefthanded bat. Kenny has good speed and is a good hitter. He still can cover ground in the outfield. He may not be able to steal a base in a tight spot anymore, but he'd still be a threat to run.

RADIO★STAR

Real talk from a fan on
Sporting News Radio

'The Tampa Bay Rays will not only keep playing this well, they will start to play even better. All the people who are expecting them to collapse are just saying that because they are the Rays, but that doesn't matter anymore. This is a new team, and they will be around for a while.' —*Adam in Florida on The Matt Spiegel Show*

POLLING PLACE

Matt Leinart, **Vince Young** ... do you care if your QB parties during the offseason?



SPORTS APPAREL

Big shoes to fill

This spring marked the beginning of a new chapter for Under Armour. The company, which first made its name with athletic training apparel and then moved into shoes with Click-Clack cleats, has made a foray into cross-trainers: the Proto Evade, Proto Speed and Proto Power.

SPORTING NEWS tested each shoe, and the results were mixed at best:

➤Proto Evade (\$80), tested by Brad Pinkerton

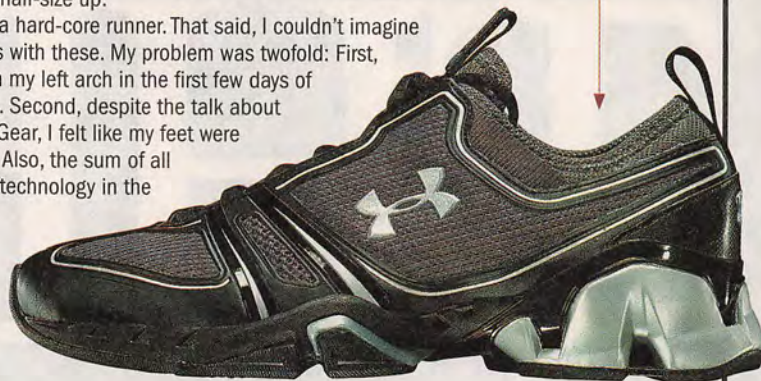
The good: The Evade held up well during agility work. The elastic mesh throughout the shoes makes them very breathable and remarkably lightweight. Also, they needed very little mileage before feeling broken-in. They got great traction on hardwood and carpeted surfaces, allowing for quick, precise cuts.

The bad: The Evade fell short in other areas of training. The shoes worked great during a plyo routine but were pretty uncomfortable during cardio and Kenpo segments—and forget about running. That means that I would need to pony up another \$80-plus for a pair of shoes to get me through the other workouts.

➤Proto Speed (\$90), tested by Chris Littmann

The good: They're not quite as light as my old Nike Free trainers, but they provide a great deal more support. The fit was pretty good in most areas, though I'd recommend going a half-size up.

The bad: I'm not a hard-core runner. That said, I couldn't imagine replacing my runners with these. My problem was twofold: First, I experienced pain in my left arch in the first few days of breaking in the shoe. Second, despite the talk about ventilation and HeatGear, I felt like my feet were suffocating at times. Also, the sum of all that cushioning and technology in the sole has what is otherwise a very low-profile shoe sitting up sort of high.



➤Proto Power (\$100), tested by Chris Mottram

The good: When I got to take them off.

The bad: They're not attractive, they're pricey and they absolutely brutalized my feet. Aside from the pain, the shoes are massive and kind of clunky. They aren't necessarily too heavy (14 ounces), but they felt huge, like I was wearing moon boots. I nearly tripped over myself several times while running—which I can assure you, is not at all embarrassing in a gym with other people around.

Bottom line: The company's motto asks athletes to "Stop Training In Running Shoes," but is that realistic? For a certain audience—those who spend hours in the gym and will take the time to change shoes between workouts—definitely. For people who aren't performing like Vernon Davis or Ray Lewis in the ads, you're probably better off with a more versatile product.

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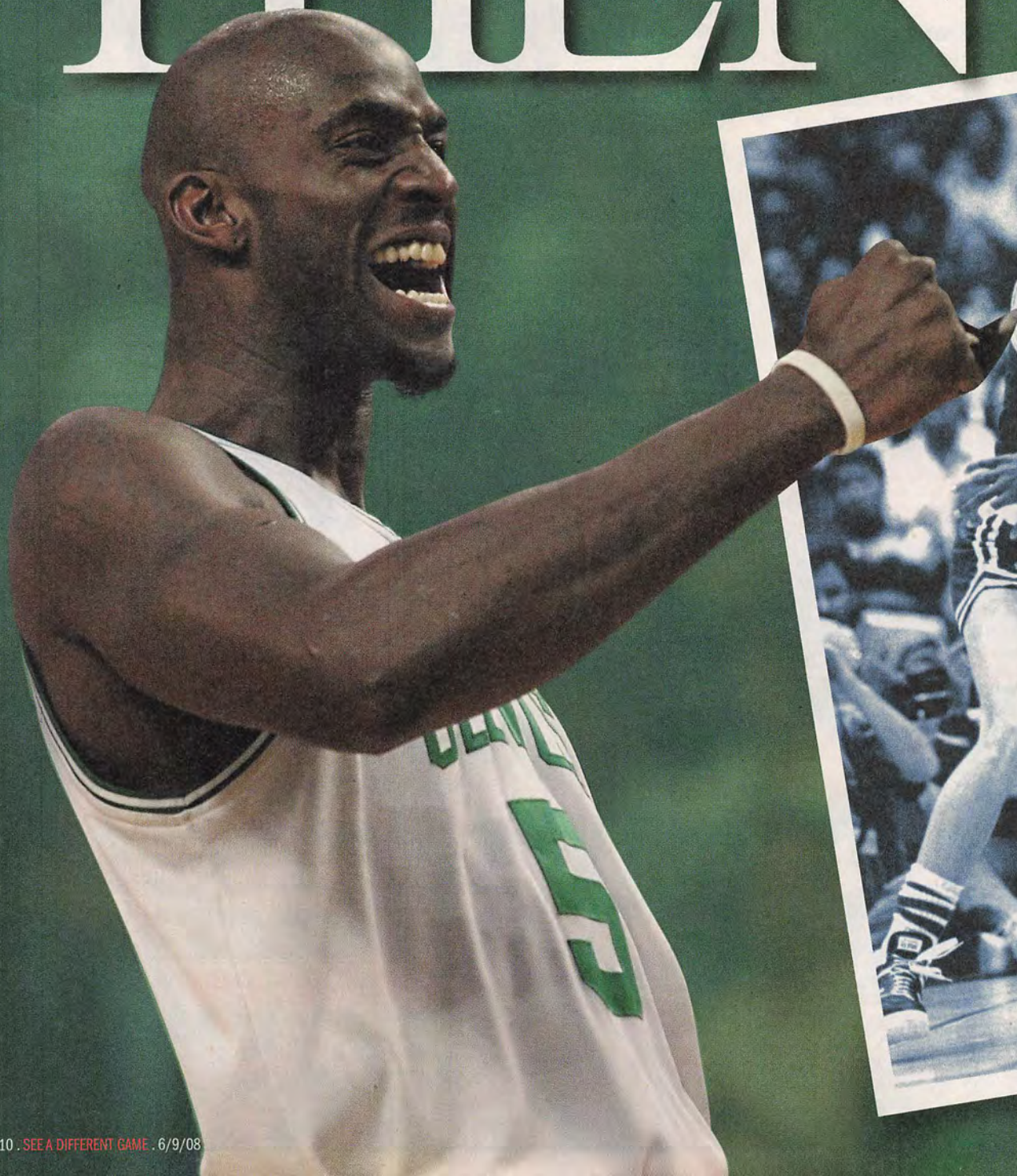


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NBA FINALS

It has been 21 years since the Lakers and Celtics last met

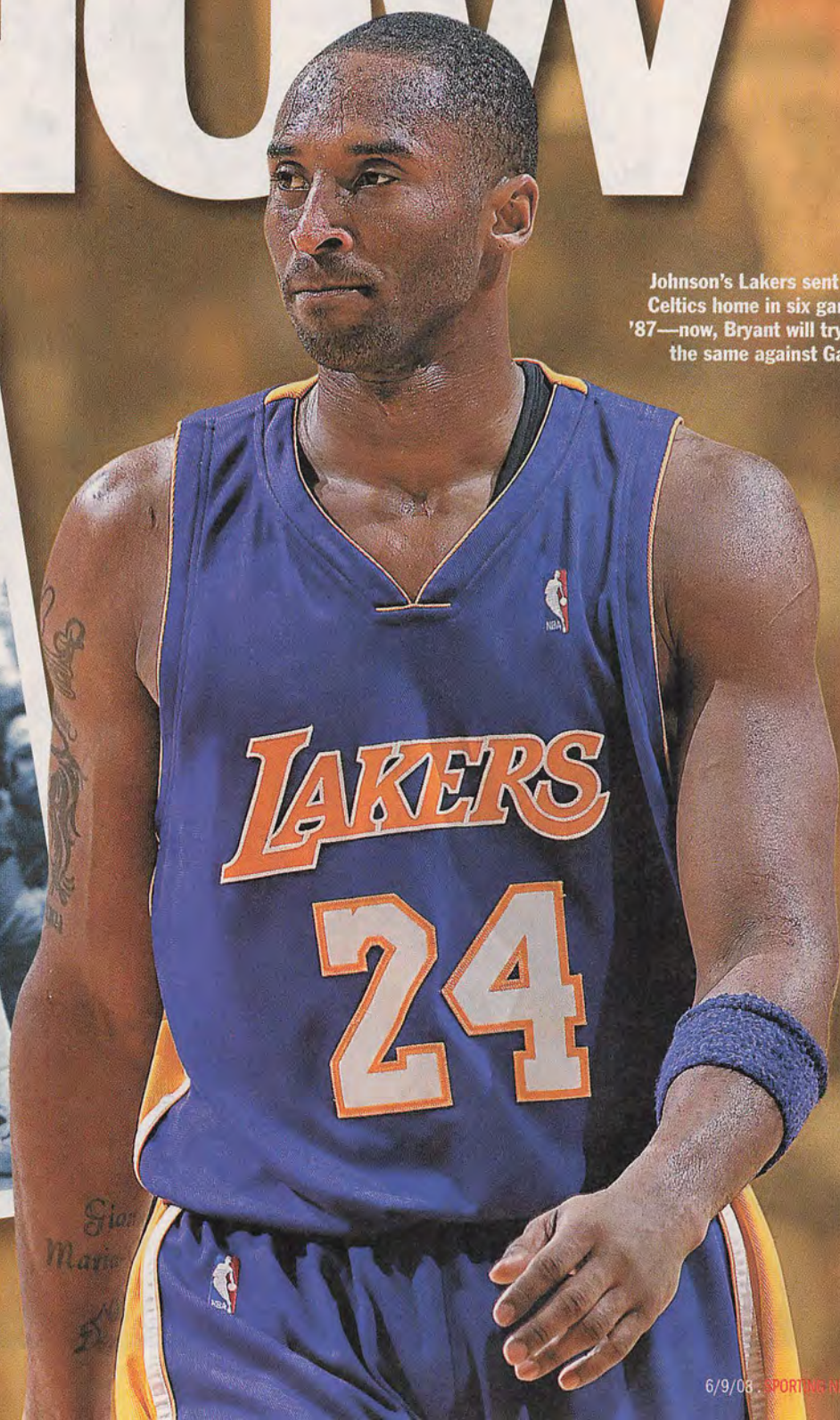
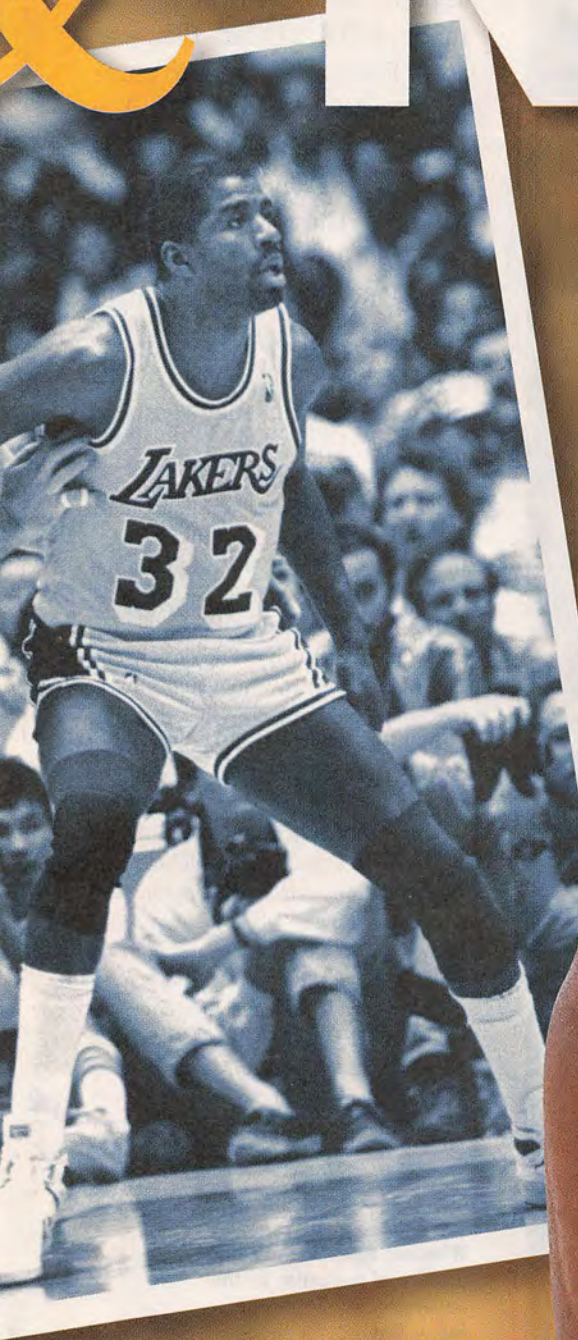
THEN &



in The Finals. Times sure have changed. *By Stan McNeal*

& NOW

Johnson's Lakers sent Bird's Celtics home in six games in '87—now, Bryant will try to do the same against Garnett.





Of all the ways the NBA has changed since the Lakers last met the Celtics in The Finals, many are indisputable. Players today are bigger (by an average of six pounds). Paychecks are larger (Larry Bird made \$1.8 million during the 1986-87 season; Kevin Garnett made \$23.8 million this season). Points are harder to come by (by an average of 20.1 a game). Arenas are newer (only three from '86-87 are still around). The glitz factor is far greater (dangerous pyrotechnics... wow!). Shorts are longer (thank goodness).

This, however, is very much open to debate: Today's game is better.

Don't worry. You've heard the adage about the good ol' days: "The older we get, the better they look." Well, you are not about to be subjected to a story romanticizing those good ol' days. Heck, after living with TiVo, high-def television and high-speed Internet, who would *want* to follow sports in any era other than this one? That would be kind of like playing ball in Chuck Taylors when you could be wearing the latest LeBrons.

Three key participants in the storied Lakers-Celtics rivalry who still hold lofty positions in the game—Bird, Byron Scott and Danny Ainge—talked to the *SPORTING NEWS* about the NBA, then and now. All three agree with the widely held perception that today's players are superior athletically but less skilled in the basics. They admit defense is emphasized more today. They maintain that today's special players would thrive in yesterday's NBA. But they won't go so far as to choose the good ol' days

Whether against the skillful players of yesterday or the superathletic players of today, Ray Allen's shooting touch is a nice thing to have in any era.



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VIAGRA can help men with ED get an erection in 30 minutes, and in some men in as little as 14 minutes. VIAGRA works for 4 hours. Remember to protect yourself and your partner from sexually transmitted diseases. Please see Important Facts for VIAGRA on the following page or visit viagra.com for full prescribing information. **For free information, including questions to ask your doctor, call 1-888-4VIAGRA (1-888-484-2472).**

**Global Better Sex Survey, conducted among 6,291 men with and without ED.*

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Who should NOT take VIAGRA?

- If you ever take medicines with nitrates.
 - Medicines that treat chest pain (angina), such as nitroglycerin or isosorbide mononitrate or dinitrate.
- If you use some street drugs, such as "poppers," flunitrazepam, or "molly."
- If you are allergic to anything in the VIAGRA tablets.

BEFORE YOU START VIAGRA

Tell your doctor if you have or ever had:

- Heart attack, abnormal heartbeats, or stroke
- Heart problems, such as heart failure, chest pain, or aortic valve narrowing
- Low or high blood pressure
- Severe vision loss
- An eye condition called retinitis pigmentosa
- Kidney or liver problems
- Blood problems, such as sickle cell anemia or leukemia
- A deformed penis, Peyronie's disease, or an erection that lasted more than 4 hours
- Stomach ulcers or any kind of bleeding problems

Tell your doctor about all your medicines, include over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and herbal products. Tell your doctor if you take or use:

- Medicines called alpha-blockers to treat high blood pressure or prostate problems. Your blood pressure could suddenly get too low. You could get dizzy or faint. Your doctor may start you on a lower dose of VIAGRA.
- Medicines called protease inhibitors for HIV. Your doctor may prescribe a 25 mg dose. Your doctor may limit VIAGRA to 25 mg in a 48-hour period.
- Other methods to cause erections. These include pills, injections, implants, or pumps.

POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS OF VIAGRA

Side effects are mostly mild to moderate. They usually go away after a few hours. Some of these are more likely to happen with higher doses. The most common side effects are:

- Headache
- Flushing (feeling hot)
- Upset stomach

Less common side effects are:

- Trouble telling blue and green apart or seeing a blue tinge on things
- Eyes being more sensitive to light
- Blurred vision

Rarely, a small number of men taking VIAGRA have reported these serious events:

- Having an erection that lasts more than 4 hours. If the erection is not treated right away, long-term loss of potency could occur.
- Sudden decrease or loss of sight in one or both eyes. We do not know if these events are caused by VIAGRA and medicines like it or caused by other factors. They may be caused by conditions like high blood pressure or diabetes. If you have sudden vision changes, stop using VIAGRA and all medicines like it. Call your doctor right away.
- Sudden decrease or loss of hearing. We do not know if these events are caused by VIAGRA and medicines like it or caused by other factors. If you have sudden hearing changes, stop using VIAGRA and all medicines like it. Call your doctor right away.
- Heart attack, stroke, irregular heartbeats, and death. We do not know whether these events are caused by VIAGRA or caused by other factors. Most of these happened in men who already had heart problems.

If you have any of these problems, stop VIAGRA. Call your doctor right away.

HOW TO TAKE VIAGRA

Do:

- Take VIAGRA only the way your doctor tells you. VIAGRA comes in 25 mg, 50 mg, and 100 mg tablets. Your doctor will tell you how much to take.
- If you are over 65 or have serious liver or kidney problems, your doctor may start you at the lowest dose (25 mg).
- Take VIAGRA about 1 hour before you want to have sex. VIAGRA starts to work in about 30 minutes when you are sexually excited. VIAGRA lasts up to 4 hours.

Don't:

- Do not take VIAGRA more than once a day.
- Do not take more VIAGRA than your doctor tells you. If you think you need more VIAGRA, talk with your doctor.
- Do not start or stop any other medicines before checking with your doctor.

NEED MORE INFORMATION?

- This is only a summary of important information. Ask your doctor or pharmacist for complete product information OR
- Go to www.viagra.com or call (888) 4-VIAGRA (484-2472).

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'In our day, this was a big rivalry. They couldn't stand us, we couldn't stand them.'

—Former Lakers guard Byron Scott

Five keys to The Finals

Based on interviews with a Western Conference advance scout and an Eastern Conference scout.

1 The regular season doesn't matter. The Celtics won both regular-season games by double-digit margins, but the teams did not meet after December 30. In other words, before Pau Gasol was traded to the Lakers. "They just gave Lamar Odom open shots (he made 8-of-24), but Lamar has played with much more confidence since Pau's arrival," the West scout says.

2 Tempo counts. Much like they did in their last meeting for the championship, the Celtics will try to harness the Lakers' fast break. "The Celtics aren't a big offensive rebounding team, so the key will be limiting their turnovers," says the East scout.

3 Kobe has help. Stopping the rest of the Lakers will be much more difficult for the Celtics than shutting down LeBron James' supporting cast was in the conference semifinals. "(The Lakers') movement will be much better than the Cavs', and that will make them more difficult to defend. The Lakers are the best passing team in the league," the West scout says. Besides that, Gasol, Odom and Co. are much better scorers than Zydrunas Ilgauskas, Wally Szczerbiak and the other Cavs.

4 Who takes Paul Pierce? The Lakers will try to limit the time Bryant spends defending the Celtics' best regular-season scorer in hopes he can avoid foul trouble. They'll leave the main task to Vlad Radmanovic, Luke Walton and Odom. "Pierce is playing with a lot of confidence right now. Beginning with Game 7 against the Cleveland, he really has stepped up his game," the East scout says.

5 The Lakers are deep. L.A.'s backups are playing "phenomenal," says the East scout. "Jordan Farmar (6-2) is playing great. I saw him get up higher than anyone for a couple of rebounds, and he's no bigger than me. And Sasha Vujacic is playing even better. Luke Walton could be a starter for a lot of teams."

over the 21st century. "For the fans' point of view, talk with them," says Bird, a Hall of Fame Celtic who now is president of the Pacers. "I like to watch it either way."

"I love the game today," says Ainge, then the guard that Lakers fans loved to hate and now the SPORTING NEWS' executive of the year for his work as the Celtics' general manager. "I love the energy. I love the defensive intensity. Coaches and teams have more resources, more scouting, more technology. I think it's an evolution of the game."

Better athletes aren't always better players

Kurt Rambis or Vlad Radmanovic? Kevin McHale or Kevin Garnett? Magic Johnson or Kobe Bryant? Today's players would be favored in a footrace or jumping contest, but Scott, a former Lakers guard, says, "Even though athletes now are a lot better than we were, I wouldn't say they're better players."

"All you have to do is look at the stats," Bird says. "There's better shooting back then, better defense now. Obviously, the skill level is not where it was at one time."

Indeed, the 1986-87 Celtics outshot (51.7 percent to 47.5) and outpassed (29.5 assists per game to 22.4) the 2007-08 Celtics. On defense, this season's Celtics allowed an average of 90.3 points, compared with 106.0 in '86-87. The Lakers, likewise, shot more accurately (51.6 percent to 47.6) and averaged more assists (29.6 to 24.4) then while playing stingier defense now (101.3 to 108.5).

Scott points out that the best of today's players are more athletic and just as skilled. "There weren't any 7-footers who could guard on the perimeter like Garnett," he says, and no do-it-all superstars like Kobe Bryant "except Michael Jordan."

The main reason for a decline in skill levels can be easily explained: too much organization. "We grew up playing basketball in a gym with 60, 70 people lined up on the wall," says Kings coach and former All-Star guard Reggie Theus. "You lose, you go home. Kids now grow up playing AAU basketball where one game is not as important because they have two more games that same day. You're not the youngest guy in the gym playing against guys older than you, getting schooled along the way in how to call a foul that wasn't a foul, how to protect yourself when you're being fouled. How to play basketball."

Defense is a priority

The numbers don't lie, to paraphrase noted basketball philosopher Rasheed Wallace. Though scoring was higher this season than it has been since 1994-95, offenses still have a long way to go to catch up to the output in 1986-87. That season, the Lakers put up 117.8 points a game, the Celtics 112.6 and every team averaged triple digits. This season, the Lakers (108.6) and Celtics (100.5) were two of 13 teams to average at least 100.

Credit (or blame, depending on your perspective) this enhanced defense to technology. Every game is recorded, every statistic is stored on a computer, and every team employs a staff to figure out not only the strengths and weaknesses of opposing players but every play the opposing team calls. If you've watched much of the playoffs on TV, you probably have heard an analyst credit a turnover to a "scouting steal."

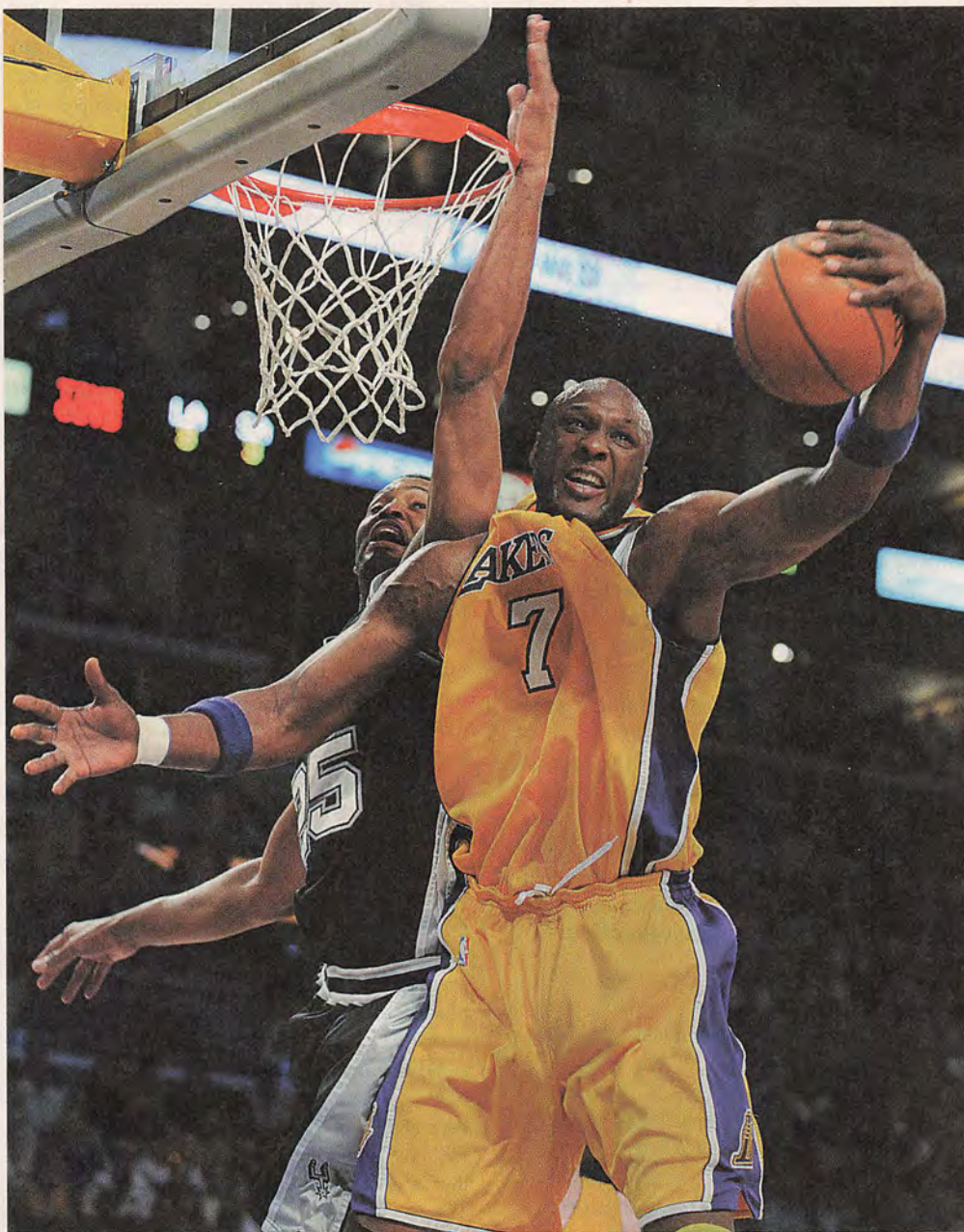
When the Celtics double-team Bryant, they not only know that he likes to start out on the left side beyond the 3-point line and work his way to the middle of the lane for a pull-up jumper, they know where the rest of the Lakers likely will set up to receive a pass. That would not have been the case 21 years ago.

"Offenses are a little more complex because the defenses have forced that," Ainge says. "In the '80s, defense was important but you didn't do as much double-teaming, you didn't do as much trapping. You played guys straight up. Celtics-Lakers in the '80s would be a bloodbath in the fourth quarter, but over the course of 48 minutes, the same focus on defense (as today) would not be there."

PREDICTIONS: The West scout likes the Celtics in seven because "of home court and how the 2-3-2 format makes it so difficult for the Lakers to win all their home games." The East scout likes the Lakers. SPORTING NEWS, which picked the Spurs to beat the Celtics before the playoffs began, believes the Lakers are playing too well for Boston to win: L.A. in five.

Lakers-Celtics has changed, too

The most competitive regular season in league history has led to soaring TV ratings during a postseason that is culminating in a Finals featuring the



Led by Odom, these Lakers feature an impressively strong supporting cast.

league's biggest superstar and two most storied franchises.

But don't get too carried away with Lakers-Celtics just yet. The current version features the two best teams this season, but they're hardly teams for the ages like the Lakers and Celtics of the '80s. Nine participants from the '86-87 Finals are in the Basketball Hall of Fame: Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Bird, Magic Johnson, McHale, Robert Parish, Bill Walton, James Worthy and coaches K.C. Jones and Pat Riley. Only two players from this year's matchup can be considered locks for Springfield—Bryant and Garnett—plus one, Lakers coach Phil Jackson, who is already there.

"Those Celtics and Lakers teams were pretty special even for their era," Ainge says. "One year, we had three guys who averaged six assists—Bird, Dennis Johnson and me. There wasn't a point guard. We had

three guys sharing those responsibilities. Of course, we didn't have Magic. Everybody could shoot, everybody could pass, everybody could dribble. There (weren't) many teams like that, even back then."

Scott holds his Lakers days in similar high regard. "Our Lakers team would still beat this Lakers team," he says. "That's the ego in me and the coach in me talking. This (Lakers) team shares the ball and plays pretty good defense, but our team was loaded."

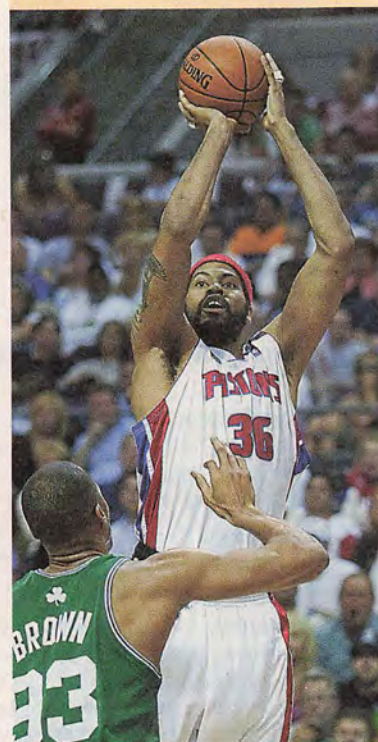
One notable difference in the Lakers-Celtics then vs. now: "In our day, this was a big rivalry," Scott says. "They couldn't stand us, we couldn't stand them. Today is different as far as the dislike between the teams compared to what we had."

Of course, a hard foul at the wrong time could turn such harmony into hatred in a hurry. And there's no disputing what kind of change that could mean. **SN**

Playoff 3-pointers

1 Don't worry about the demise of the Spurs. As long as Gregg Popovich is in charge, they will remain contenders in the West. Look for San Antonio to retool its bench with an emphasis on youth and, as always, character.

2 It's time for the Pistons' Rasheed Wallace to look in the mirror. After being fined following Game 5 of the conference finals because of another tirade about the officiating, Wallace showed up late for the Game 6 shootaround and then missed 10 of his 12 shots in the most important game of the season. Perhaps coach Flip Saunders is not the one who needs to go.



3 If you're looking for an analyst to state the obvious during The Finals, pay attention to Mark Jackson. If excellent analysis with self-effacing humor is your preference, Jackson's sidekick Jeff Van Gundy is your man.



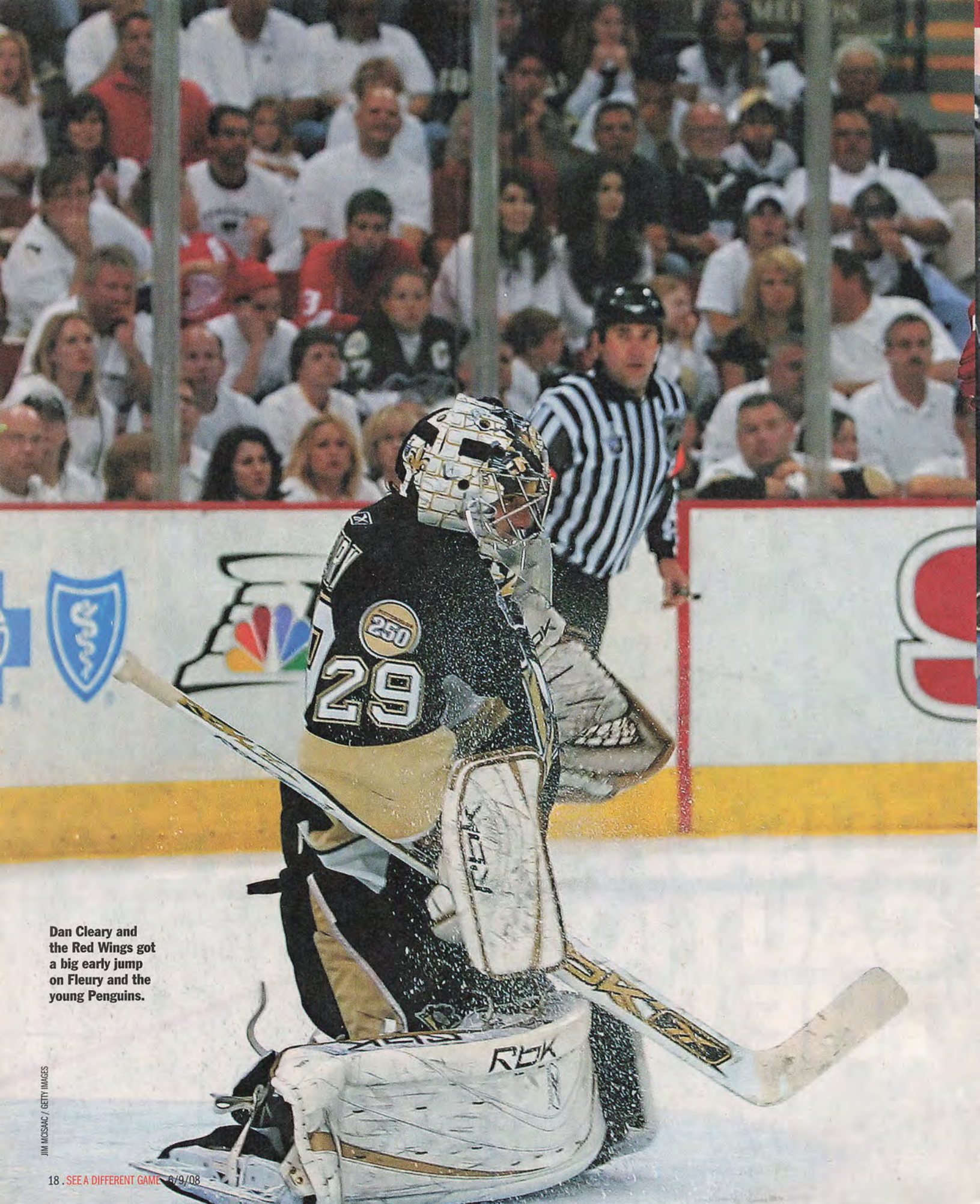
Kyle Busch clinched his fourth NASCAR Nationwide Series™ victory of the year at Lowe's Motor Speedway. The #32 Braun Racing Dollar General Camry team strategically chose not to pit and Kyle stretched his tires and fuel all the way to the checkered flag. For the latest news, visit toyota.com/pitpass

BUSCH THROWS CAUTION TO THE WIND.



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Dan Cleary and the Red Wings got a big early jump on Fleury and the young Penguins.



NHL FINALS

The young Penguins say the quality of their opponents is responsible for a rough start in the Stanley Cup finals. Outsiders point to the Red Wings' huge experience advantage. Maybe it's a combination of both.

By Dave Molinari

Advantage: Red Wings

Game 3 of the Stanley Cup finals was still eight or nine hours away as Penguins defenseman Ryan Whitney sat in his locker room stall at Mellon Arena, reflecting on all that had gone wrong in the previous two games.

Whitney knew full well that simply listing the problems—let alone trying to explain them—could keep him busy until sometime around opening faceoff.

Why, for example, had the Red Wings been able to earn distinction as the first Cup finals team to score the first seven goals of the series?

Why did it seem as if the Penguins, who usually generate vapor trails when they go on the attack, were encountering 15 Red Wings any time they ventured into the neu-



Jiri Hudler, a member of the Red Wings' fourth line, got an understandable emotional jolt from his Game 4-winning goal.

tral zone?

And, perhaps most important, why had anyone believed this finals had the potential to be a classic?

Of all the theories offered to explain Pittsburgh's struggles, the most popular was that the Penguins' shortcomings were being exposed by their lack of experience on the game's biggest stage. That despite the breathtaking talents of its core players—starting with centers Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin—Pittsburgh was paying a terrible price for not having been there before. That whatever personnel advantages Detroit enjoyed were magnified because so many of the Wings had played in—and won—Cup finals before many of the Penguins had even reached high school.

'No matter whether they have older or younger guys, we have respect for their team. We can't control the fact that we have a lot of young guys. That's just the way it is.' —Sidney Crosby

Some Pittsburgh players bristled at the suggestion that getting this far in the playoffs for the first time could be an issue. "What experience shows you is how to react in adversity and new situations," Crosby said, "but we've done a great job of doing that the whole year."

Whitney, though, did not reject the possibility. "That's a tough one," he said. "They've played better hockey than us. Are they playing better because they have experience or are they playing better because we didn't play up to our capabilities?"

Whitney never answered his question, but that night the Penguins answered with an encouraging 3-2 victory that sliced Detroit's series lead to 2-1. Three days later, though, the Red Wings repeated

their early formula for success and clamped down the Penguins' offense in a 2-1 Game 4 victory. The battle-tested Wings were back in control.

Experience is a funny thing. When you don't have it, it's overrated and annoying. When you do, you seem to have an intangible advantage, which is the case with this year's Red Wings. Consider:

■ Detroit has 10 players whose names are engraved on the Stanley Cup. Pittsburgh has three, and only six of the 26 players on the Penguins' roster had been in a Cup finals before this spring. That's two fewer than the number of holdovers from the Wings' 2002 championship team.

■ Red Wings defenseman Chris Chelios won a Cup with Montreal in 1986, one year before Crosby was born and two before Jordan Staal (the first teenager to appear in a finals since Dainius Zubrus of Philadelphia in 1997) came along.

■ The average age of Detroit players who made at least one appearance during the first three playoff rounds was 32.3 years; for Pittsburgh, it was 27.9. A few of the Wings were picking up the finer points of pro hockey around the time some of their Penguins counterparts were mastering the fine art of toilet training.

"I didn't even realize they were that young until I started hearing their ages," Detroit goalie Chris Osgood says.

That could go down as the silver medalist of great 2008 playoff quotes—the undisputed champion is this gem offered up by Pittsburgh winger Marian Hossa, after the Penguins had won the first three games of their opening-round series against Ottawa: "I don't think we expected to be up 3-0 so early." It emphasizes the point that the youth many observers view as a long-term asset for Pittsburgh could be a short-term liability.

Hall of Fame center Mark Messier draws a parallel between the Pittsburgh-Detroit series and the 1983 final between Edmonton—featuring a lineup that included Wayne Gretzky, Paul Coffey, Grant Fuhr, Jari Kurri and Messier—and the New York Islanders.

The Oilers, on the cusp of a run that yielded four Stanley Cups in five years and five in seven, were overwhelmed that spring by the Islanders, who swept their way to the last of four consecutive Cup wins.

"We were in the same position," Messier says. "(The Penguins) are having to weave their way through the process without experience. That can be tough. Experience can help when you're going through adversity."

Red Wings coach Mike Babcock echoes that point, suggesting the Cup finals provide a learning



The pressure was on Fleury, who had his moments but couldn't handle everything thrown at him.

curve that participants must go through before grasping it fully. And not necessarily only because of what happens on the ice.

"When you've done something and you've done it before, you've been through it, you don't think you know—you know you know," Babcock says. "There's a whole different feeling."

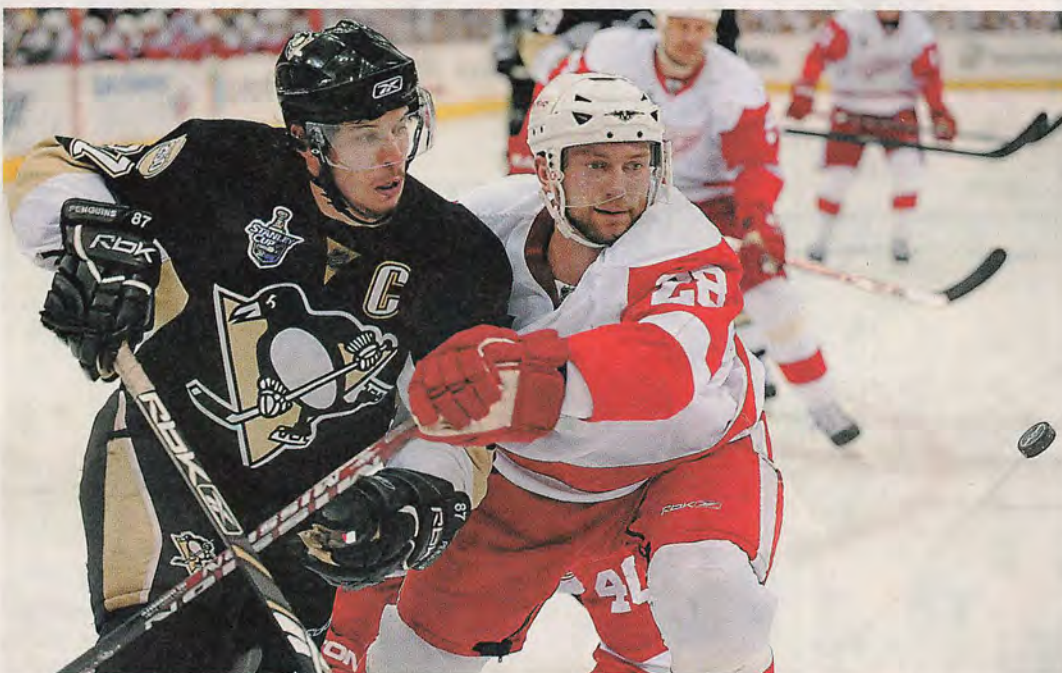
"You're not overwhelmed by the situation. There's going to be all these people or your whole family and people you don't even know in your

family want to come to your town and stay at your house. You've just been through it. You understand it."

Penguins defenseman Darryl Sydor, appearing in his fifth finals, agrees that some demands are easier to deal with after a player has been through them before. But he downplayed the on-ice importance of experience. A few days after Detroit's 4-0 victory in the opener, however, Sydor offered that "maybe the first game, we were kind of in awe" of the Red Wings. Goalie Marc-Andre Fleury, 23, didn't buy that idea. Although he didn't dispute that some aspects of the Cup finals were new to most of the Penguins, Fleury insisted the Red Wings' dominance in Games 1 and 2 had more to do with their resumes than their birth certificates.

"Detroit has good players," he said. "It doesn't matter how old they are or how old we are. We've faced older teams during the playoffs and beaten them. When I'm on the ice, I don't think, 'Oh, this guy has more experience than I do.'"

Winning Game 3 restored Pittsburgh's equilibrium; the Penguins were at least competitive in Game 4, even though they failed to alter the apparent inevitability of a Red Wings victory. Inevitable, perhaps, because the Wings were navigating familiar turf while the Penguins were foundering in uncharted territory. **SN**



Crosby enjoyed success in Game 3 but was otherwise shut down by Brian Rafalski and the Red Wings.



Aybar is another productive product of the Angels' farm system, though he landed on the disabled list with a dislocated pinkie in late May.

What's the deal with the Angels?

They're a team about nothing fancy, but by paying attention to the little things, they've quietly developed into perennial contenders

By Ryan Fagan

Before spring training wrapped up, the Angels had absorbed a double shot of bad news. Their top starters—righthanders John Lackey and Kelvin Escobar—were out indefinitely.

Not exactly how they wanted to kick off the defense of their American League West title, but the baseball schedule offers no sympathy. So, the season started ... yada, yada, yada ... and the Angels entered June in first place, with only four starts for Lackey and nothing from the still-rehabbing Escobar.

Yep, we yada, yada, yadaed the best part.

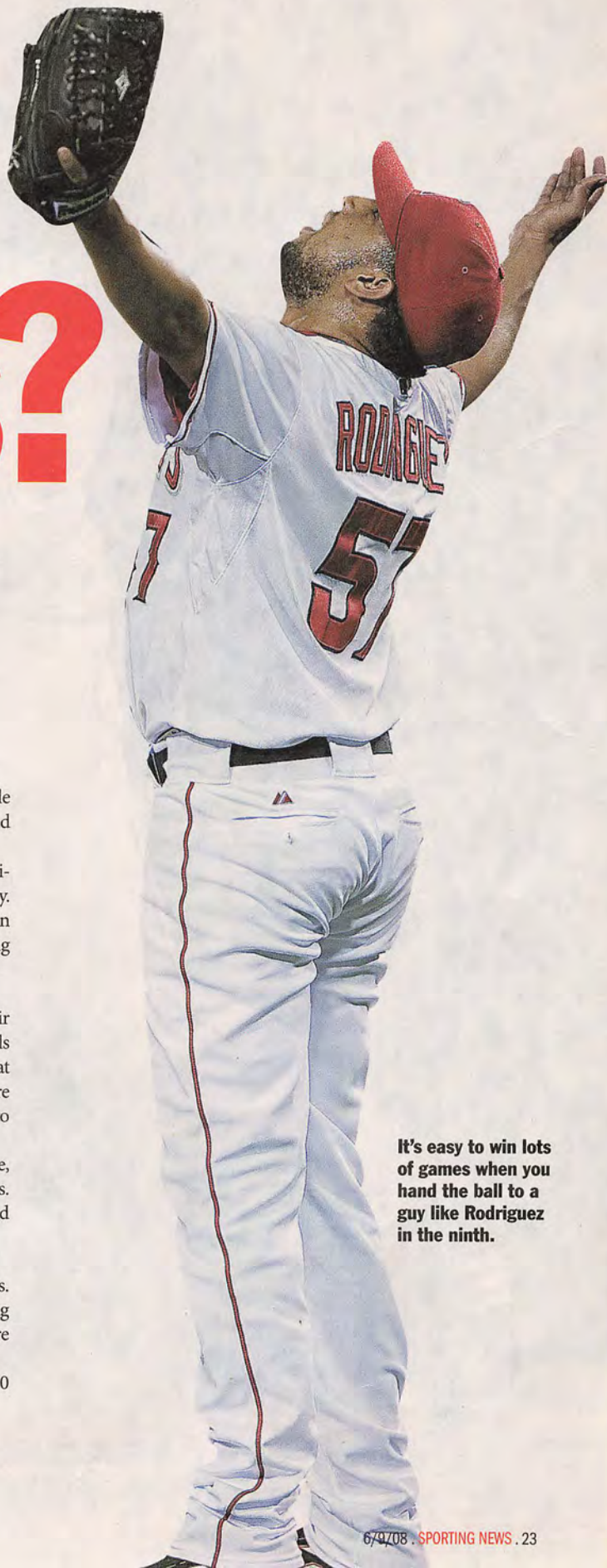
These Angels are a deep, resilient group of ballplayers, a reflection of their manager, Mike Scioscia. They're the *Seinfeld* of major league baseball. The Angels are a wildly successful team—three A.L. West titles in the past four seasons—that thrives on being about nothing fancy. They have an outstanding ensemble of core stars, a solid supporting cast, an ability to adjust and a relentless commitment to doing the little things right.

"We play the game," says Chone Figgins, who has started games at second base, third base, shortstop, left field, center field and right field over the past five years. "That's obviously not a secret, but when there are runners that need to be moved over, we try to move them over and we get them in."

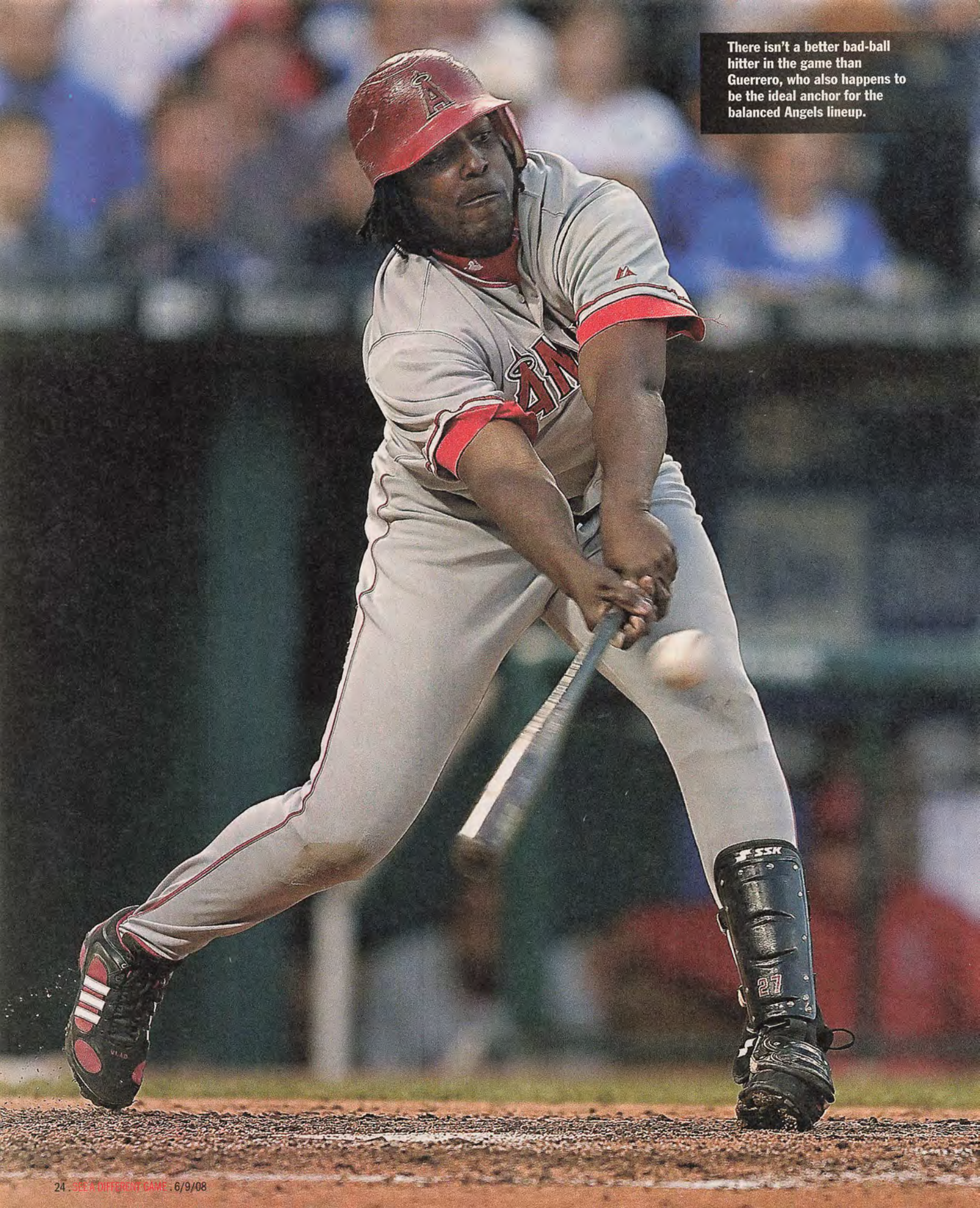
They play the game, and they play it well. Opponents *love* that.

"They're a pain in the butt," Orioles second baseman Brian Roberts says. "They're always putting pressure on you, from 1 through 9. They're always doing things, always have guys that can run, always have guys who can manufacture runs very well."

The lineup's balance, as always, is remarkable. Six players have from 23 to 30



It's easy to win lots of games when you hand the ball to a guy like Rodriguez in the ninth.



There isn't a better bad-ball
hitter in the game than
Guerrero, who also happens to
be the ideal anchor for the
balanced Angels lineup.



Figgins, like most of the team's middle infielders, has spent time on the disabled list this season. But he has played well when actually healthy.

RBIs, and all six of them have from five to 10 home runs. Four players have at least five stolen bases.

"And then you combine that with their pitching," Roberts says. "They've always been able to pitch." The rotation is deep—more on that in a moment—and the bullpen is anchored by closer Francisco Rodriguez, who has three straight 40-plus-save seasons.

The Angels have signed big-name free agents—Vladimir Guerrero and Torii Hunter, for example—but have steadfastly refused to dangle prospects from their fertile farm system as trade bait. Not that there's anything wrong with that.

"If you're not developing your own guys, scouting, drafting and developing your own players, a philosophy we know is important, it's very, very tough to keep the continuity and keep the team where it needs to be," Scioscia says. "This whole clubhouse really has a feel of player development in it, which is really the ultimate."

The ultimate in consistency, which has helped the Angels avoid the pratfalls and hot-and-cold cycles most organizations face on a regular basis. It has helped them stay among the elite of the American League. But they don't get the publicity heaped upon the Red Sox and Yankees, and what they haven't done since 2002 is win—or even get to—the World Series.

"I think that's probably one of the reasons people are kind of like, 'Ho-hum, they're gonna be good,'" Roberts says. "And you just kind of take it for granted."

Bubble boys

Scioscia is sick and tired of talking about his

organization's depth. The injury bug has locked onto the franchise and, so far, has refused to let go. Every couple of weeks, another starter hits the disabled list, and every couple of weeks, Scioscia is asked what he's going to do about it.

The answers were much easier at the beginning of the season. When Lackey and Escobar went on the shelf, Scioscia and pitching coach Mike Butcher knew they could replace them with an unusual combination of youth and experience. Both Joe Saunders and Ervin Santana had struggled mightily through much of 2007 and even spent time in the minors, but both have found their stride this year.

Saunders, a crafty lefthander, is 8-2 with a 2.76 ERA that ranks fourth in the A.L. Santana, a hard-throwing righthander, is 7-2 with a 3.09 ERA and 64 strikeouts in 75½ innings. "Both guys are capable of doing what they're doing," Butcher says, "but to have Escobar and

Lackey down, to have 37 wins sitting on the D.L., you need guys to pick it up, and Joe and Ervin have certainly done that."

The changes in approach for Saunders and Santana haven't been dramatic, but there has been a focus on going back to the basics. "The biggest thing is they're out there commanding the fastball, commanding the zone, throwing all their pitches for strikes, keeping the hitters off-balance and giving us a chance to win," Butcher says.

Pitchers Scot Shields, Chris Bootcheck and Dustin Moseley also have missed time, and the infield—other than rising star Casey Kotchman at first base—has been a hamstrung mess.

■ When second baseman Howie Kendrick injured his hamstring in early April, utilityman

Maicer Izturis—who started six of the first eight games at shortstop—became the starter at second and Erick Aybar took over full time at shortstop.

■ When Izturis strained his lower back a few weeks later, Figgins slid over from third to second and the team inserted slugging prospect Brandon Wood at third.

■ When Figgins hurt his hamstring in mid-May, Sean Rodriguez—who had been called up six days earlier—took over at second.

■ When Aybar dislocated a pinkie and went on the D.L. on May 21, Izturis—who has started games at second and third since his return—reclaimed the shortstop job.

In one seven-game stretch in late May, five different players started at third base. Four players have started at least six games at second. About the only constant for this team is its perch atop the A.L. West.

Hello, Torii

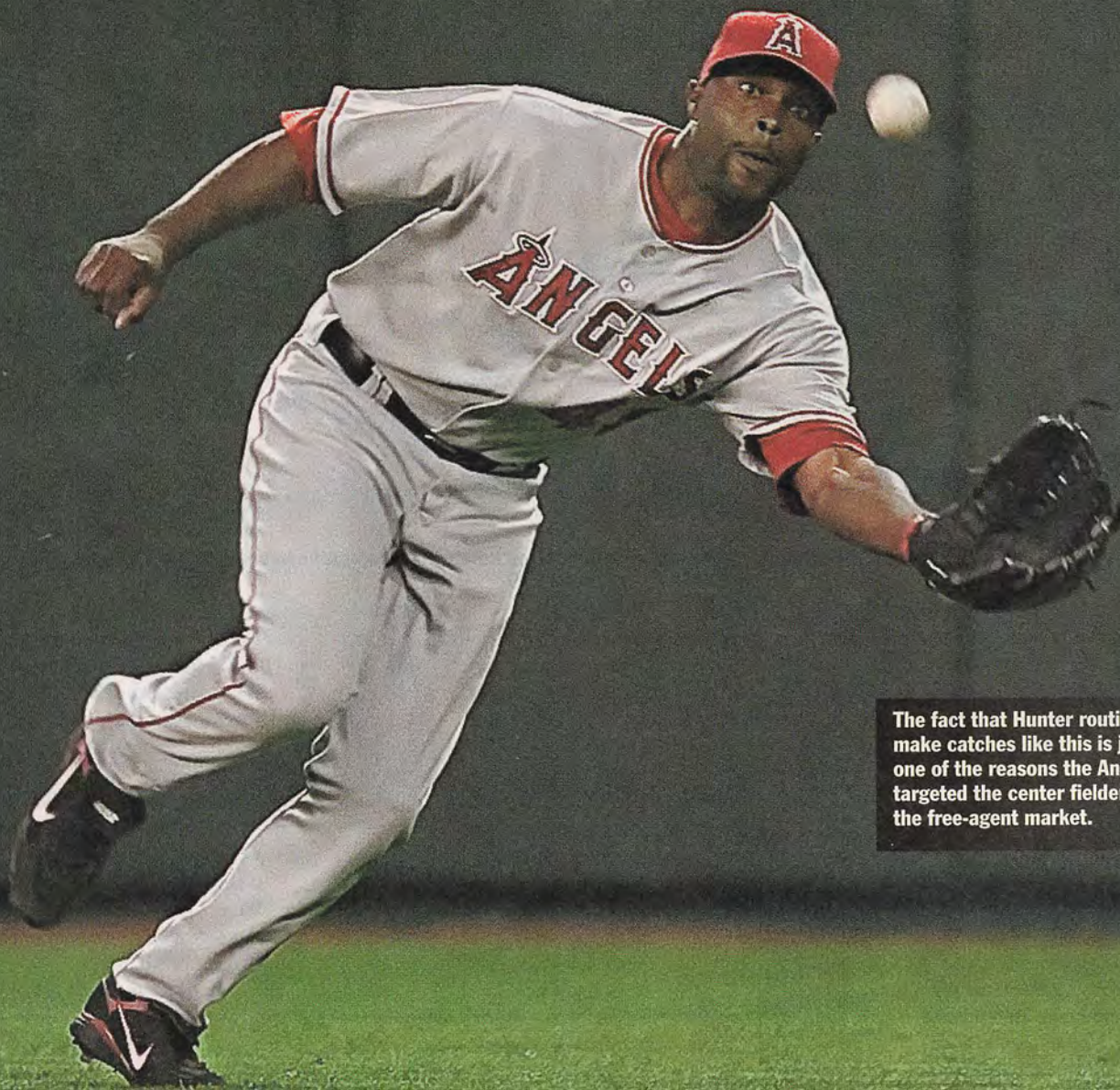
A rally monkey, which is for better or worse the symbol of the Angels' extended run of success, hangs on the side of Hunter's locker. It was a gift from Jered Weaver after Hunter smacked an April 7 grand slam with one out in the ninth inning to lift the Angels past the Indians, 6-4.

It's safe to say the ever-smiling Hunter is enjoying his indoctrination to life on the West Coast. "You can't beat this," he says. "Me, coming from Arkansas, and I live in Dallas, you come here and you're driving up the Pacific Coast Highway and that's like a dream. You never want to leave. I'm enjoying it. It's surreal to me right now."

Surreal is one word. *Warm* is another.

"I left Minnesota and the Metrodome, and that place was cold and they don't play outside," Hunter says. "Now, it's like, 'Why me? Why am I being blessed to come and play in Anaheim in the sun

The Angels have refused to dangle prospects as trade bait. Not that there's anything wrong with that.



The fact that Hunter routinely make catches like this is just one of the reasons the Angels targeted the center fielder in the free-agent market.

and the grass all of a sudden?' They've got a little song called 'I Love L.A.' This is definitely the place to be. I grew up in the South, and I'm telling you, this is the place to be."

Hunter signed a five-year, \$90 million free-agent contract with the Angels in the offseason. But the pressure that so often accompanies such a deal doesn't seem to apply to the speedy center fielder, who's hitting .282 with seven homers and 26 RBIs. He's even showing his new teammates a few tricks.

With two out in the seventh inning of an early May game against the Orioles, Hunter noticed Baltimore starter Jeremy Guthrie was putting his head down as he focused on Garret Anderson at the plate, virtually ignoring him at first base. The next time Guthrie did that, he swiped second base without a play, moving into scoring position.

He pulled the same trick in the 10th inning against the Tigers last week. With two outs, second baseman Placido Polanco walking away from the bag and pitcher Freddy Dolsi turning his attention toward Anderson at the plate, Hunter swiped second base as Dolsi, too, held on to the ball.

That's what Hunter likes to call the "hyena" in him, a trait he says he shares with his new teammates and looked for when he shopped for a new team.

"I knew what team took first-to-third and were hyenas out there, always taking advantage of weaknesses," Hunter says. "I knew the Angels were that team, and when they called, it was a no-brainer. You saw how long it took me to sign—not long at all."

Hunter's aggressiveness creates scoring opportunities, and more opportunities lead to more

runs, which lead to more wins. The Angels have been very good at capitalizing in such situations during their run of success. From the start of the 2004 season through Saturday, they have a .282 batting average with runners in scoring position, which ranks behind only the Tigers' .283 mark.

So far, so good for Hunter and the Angels. But winning games in the regular season isn't the ultimate goal. "We won't know the full extent (of Hunter's impact) until the season ends, so that's something you'll have to ask later," Figgins says. "He plays the game hard, and that's the way we all play it. From that standpoint right there, he fits in well."

When October rolls around, the ideal Angels script would read something like this: *The playoffs start ... yada, yada, yada ... what a great parade.*

SN

No pain, no gain? That's not how it works in baseball

The Angels have handled their health problems as well as they could have hoped, but injuries—or a lack of them—always play a major role in determining baseball's division winners. Bangs, bruises and breaks have affected teams from each of the other five divisions, too.

A.L. East

Yankees. The fallen: 3B Alex Rodriguez (quadriceps), C Jorge Posada (shoulder), RHP Phil Hughes (rib).

The combination of slow starts and injuries have been rough on the fourth-place Yankees. Third baseman Morgan Ensberg and catcher Jose Molina—the primary replacements for Rodriguez and Posada—have struggled with .203 and .218 averages. Hughes, touted as the up-and-coming rotation anchor, was awful before hitting the D.L. in late April.

A.L. Central

White Sox. The fallen: SS Juan Uribe (hamstring).

The Sox's run of good health is enough to make other franchises sick. The only starter they've lost to the D.L. is a guy who was hitting .198. It's no coincidence that the South Siders sit atop their division.

N.L. East

Braves. The fallen: RHP John Smoltz (shoulder), LHP Tom Glavine (hamstring), RHP Rafael Soriano (elbow), RHP Peter Moylan (elbow).

Injuries have decimated the pitching staff—Buddy Carlyle (neck), Chuck James (shoulder) and Mike Hampton (pectoral) also have spent much of this season on the D.L. Soriano was set to take over as the closer; when he went down, Moylan was there to take his place. Now, the job will belong to Smoltz. If the cascade of injuries stops, the staff could be very good. That seems like a big if, though.



N.L. Central

Cardinals. The fallen: RHP Joel Pineiro (groin), RHP Jason Isringhausen (hand).

St. Louis has the makings of a great D.L. rotation with Pineiro joining RHPs Chris Carpenter (elbow) and Matt Clement (shoulder) and LHP Mark Mulder (shoulder). When—OK, if—those starters recover, it will provide a big second half boost to a team that has, by most accounts, overachieved.

N.L. West

Padres. The fallen: RHP Jake Peavy (elbow), RHP Chris Young (facial fractures), C Josh Bard (ankle).

In one disastrous inning, Cardinals first baseman Albert Pujols knocked out Young with a line drive to his face and Bard with a slide, which figures to send an already disappointing season spiraling toward completely lost. Peavy, the reigning N.L. Cy Young award winner, is on the rehab trail, but there might not be much his return can do for this squad.

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A close-up, high-contrast portrait of Asante Samuel, a professional football player. He has long, dark dreadlocks and is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. He is wearing a dark Philadelphia Eagles jersey with a white "E" on the shoulder. A small NFL Equipment patch is visible on the collar of his jersey. The background is a bright, slightly hazy sky.

The Eagles got well-deserved cred for filling their biggest need with the top free agent: cornerback Asante Samuel. Not only does Samuel bring big-time playmaking ability, he doesn't lose many staredowns, either.



The grades are in

The usual teacher's pets slacked off a bit, but the Eagles got the gold star and the Jets and Vikings moved to the head of the class *By Dennis Dillon*

You know it's a strange year when Redskins owner Daniel Snyder keeps his checkbook in his suit pocket, the Browns improve significantly without having a pick in the top three rounds of the draft and the league's sacks leader is traded. Those were just three developments in an NFL offseason filled with hope for the have-nots and tough hits for a couple of the haves.

How did your team do? Well, let's check the report card.

A

Jets. Among the most active shoppers, they fortified their offensive line with the additions of LG Alan Faneca and RT Damien Woody. NT Kris Jenkins should be a force in the 3-4, and big things are expected from Vernon Gholston, the best pass rusher in the draft.

Vikings. They addressed their primary needs by acquiring three veteran starters: premier RE Jared Allen, who led the league in sacks last season with the Chiefs, WR Bernard Berrian and SS Madiou Williams.

Allen is ready to cowboy up in Minnesota, and there isn't a Purple People-Eating fan who isn't fired up about his potential impact.

B+

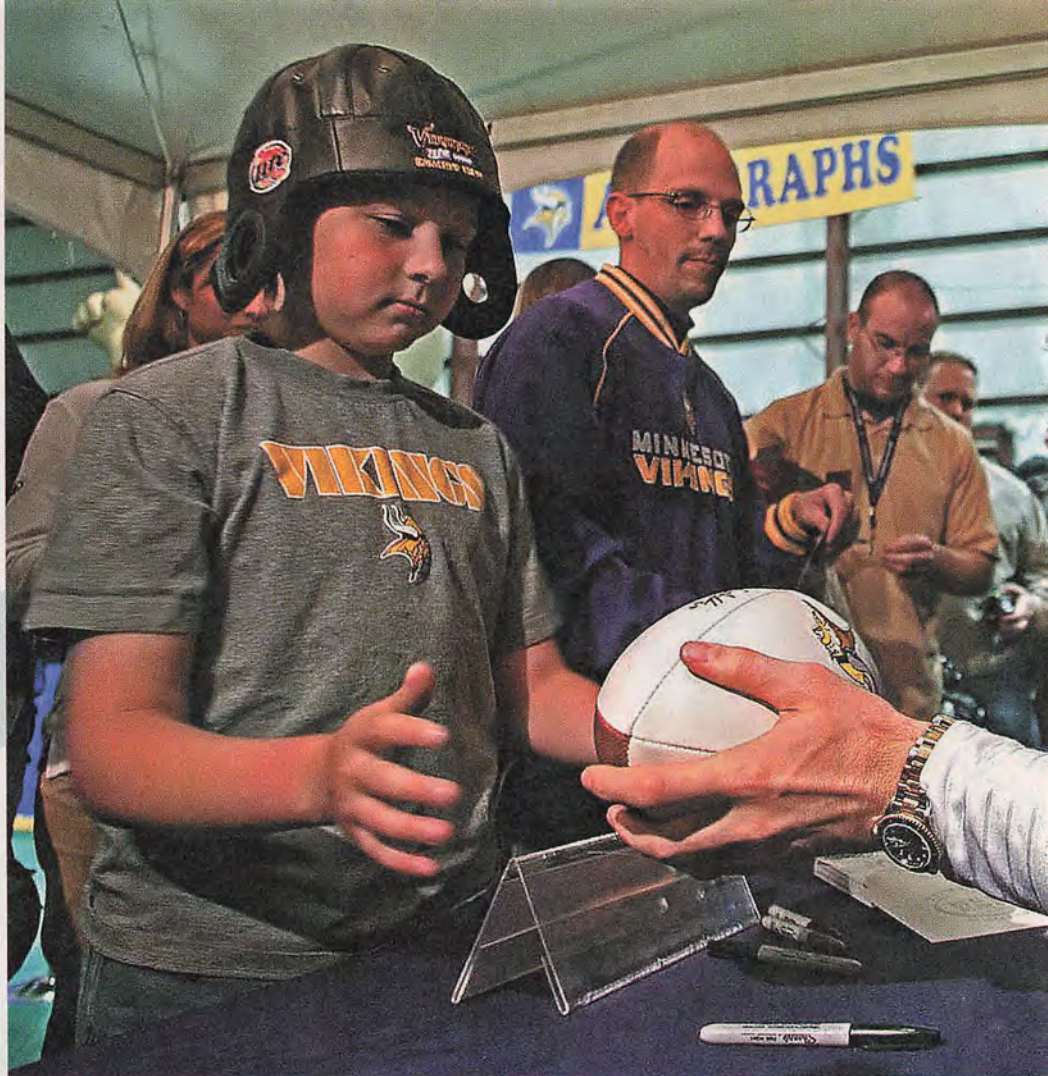
Bills. DT Marcus Stroud fills their need for a run stuffer—assuming he stays healthy—and linebacker Kawika Mitchell is bigger than their recent starters on the weak side. Rookies CB Leodis McKelvin and WR James Hardy could start in Week 1.

Browns. They mended their broken defense by adding DEs Corey Williams and Shaun Rogers, but they must replace departed CB Leigh Bodden. WR Donte' Stallworth will complement Braylon Edwards.

B

Eagles. Pro Bowl CB Asante Samuel addresses their most pressing need. Chris Clemons (eight sacks for Oakland last year) will be counted on as a situational pass rusher and special teams contributor. They suffered no major losses but failed to add an offensive tackle in free agency.

Raiders. CB DeAngelo Hall, WR Javon Walker and SS Gibril Wilson look like nice pickups—and Darren McFadden was the top running back in the draft. Asking Kwame Harris to play left tackle and protect QB JaMarcus Russell's blind side is risky.



B-

Chiefs. Players moved in and out of K.C. at warp speed. The Chiefs may not get big results this year, but they set themselves up for the future with a boffo draft. Trading DE Jared Allen will hurt in the short term.

Cowboys. After a 13-3 season, they took minimal hits in free agency. Re-signing LT Flozell Adams was a key move. They could get immediate help from RB Felix Jones and CB Mike Jenkins, their two first-round picks.

Panthers. WRs Muhsin Muhammad and D.J. Hackett are upgrades over Drew Carter and Keary Colbert. WLB Landon Johnson has the speed to cover a lot of ground. Rookie RB Jonathan Stewart could be a great fit in their power running game.

Saints. If LB Jonathan Vilma, DE Bobby McCray and rookie DT Sedrick Ellis make plays, the defense will be vastly improved. Their cornerbacks, though, still are mediocre.

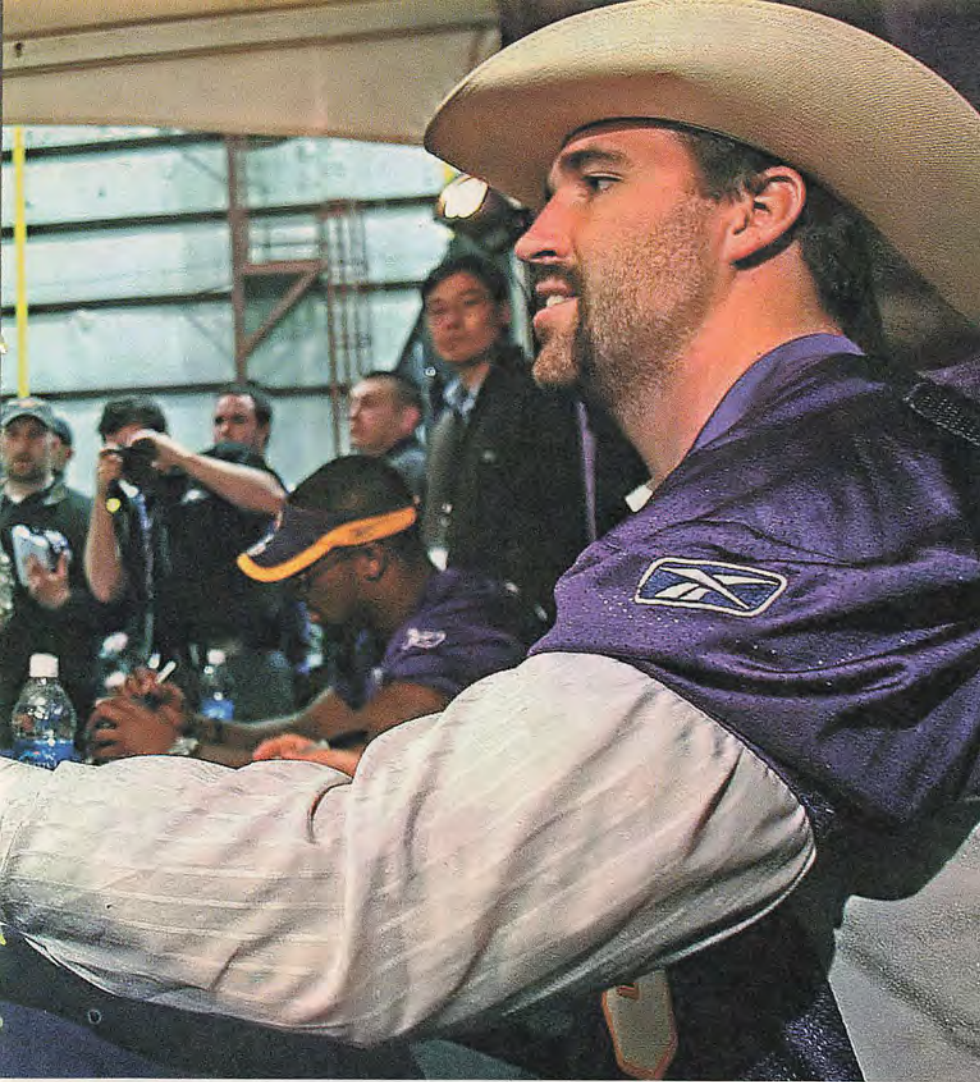
C+

Buccaneers. DB Eugene Wilson was a nice addition, but most of their other gains were only marginal improvements over their losses. The wide receiver position still lacks bite.

Broncos. Denver supplemented its roster with several middle-tier free agents but no difference-makers. First-round pick Ryan Clady is expected to replace the retired Matt Lepsis at left tackle.

Jaguars. CB Drayton Florence was a nice get, and rookies Derrick Harvey and Quentin Groves could boost the pass rush. But the additions of underachieving WRs Jerry Porter and Troy Williamson did not balance out the losses of DT Marcus Stroud and DE Bobby McCray.

Rams. LG Jacob Bell, K Josh Brown and rookie RE Chris Long filled needs. The Rams will miss WR Isaac Bruce and LB Brandon Chillar.



C-

Bengals. RE Antwan Odom was their only significant pickup in free agency, and they lost two starters in DE Justin Smith and S Madiou Williams. OLB Keith Rivers, their first-round pick, is a big, fast playmaker.

Chargers. They fortified their depth on the offensive line and secondary, but they lost more than they gained in free agency. They'll miss backup RB Michael Turner and CB Drayton Florence.

Falcons. In the process of revamping an aging, declining roster, they lost a couple of key players in CB DeAngelo Hall and TE Alge Crumpler.

Giants. Losing OLB Kawika Mitchell and SS Gibril Wilson in free agency left holes in a championship defense. But they think top rookie S Kenny Phillips will be better than Wilson.

Lions. Detroit replenished its secondary with the acquisitions of CBs Leigh Bodden and Brian Kelly and FS Dwight Smith—all of whom are expected to start. But the Lions still lack a dominant pass rusher.

Redskins. Instead of diving headfirst into free agency, as they've done in past years, the Redskins barely got their big toe wet. They didn't have a first-round draft pick.

Steelers. As usual, Pittsburgh wasn't a big player in free agency—and it took a big hit when seven-time Pro Bowl G Alan Faneca left for the Jets. RB Rashard Mendenhall and WR Limas Sweed are rookie skill players who could help immediately.

Titans. G Jake Scott was a nice addition as a replacement for Jacob Bell, but the Titans gambled on DE Jevon Kearse, TE Alge Crumpler and WR Justin McCareins.

C

Cardinals. If OLB Travis LaBoy steps up in place of Calvin Pace and OLB Clark Haggans adds depth, their free-agent hits won't look so substantial. Rookie CB Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie may need time to develop, and there's no heir apparent to former No. 3 WR Bryant Johnson.

Colts. They focused on re-signing TE Dallas Clark and LG Ryan Lilja, two of their core players, and welcomed back RB Dominic Rhodes. They're banking on rookie G Mike Pollak to replace Jake Scott.

Dolphins. Miami added players to help its transition to the 3-4 defense (NT Jason Ferguson, ILB Reggie Torbor) and improve its special teams play (Keith Davis, Boomer Grigsby). The Dolphins filled a longtime problem spot by selecting Jake Long, the top left tackle prospect in the draft. If they lose

DE Jason Taylor, their grade will fall.

49ers. Bryant Johnson was a productive No. 3 wideout in Arizona, but Isaac Bruce, 35, is too old to be the No. 1 receiver. RE Justin Smith underachieved in Cincinnati but may be a better fit in a 3-4.

Seahawks. Fixing the running game was the top priority. RBs Julius Jones and T.J. Duckett replace Shaun Alexander, and Mike Wahle moves in at left guard, a nagging problem since Steve Hutchinson left two years ago. They'll miss Josh Brown's clutch kicking.

Texans. They didn't lose or add any impact players, but they signed Jacques Reeves to provide insurance at cornerback while Dunta Robinson recovers from a torn ACL. Rookie LT Duane Brown was a reach with the 26th overall pick.

D

Bears. Top draft pick Chris Williams could step in at left tackle and revitalize an aging line. But the Bears lost WR Bernard Berrian, their best offensive player, and they didn't make any moves to improve their quarterback situation.

Packers. They lost a future Hall of Fame quarterback and a valuable member of their D-line rotation in Corey Williams. Other than that, it was a great offseason for Cheeseheads.

Patriots. Re-signing WR Randy Moss was big, but they said goodbye to premier CB Asante Samuel and didn't add any big-impact free agents.

Ravens. They put the franchise tag on OLB/DE Terrell Suggs, which ate up a bunch of cap space, and QB Steve McNair's surprise retirement announcement weakened an offense that was already in flux.

SN

REFUELING THE JETS

If the team's offense—particularly its disappointing ground game—is going to take off in 2008, veteran line imports Alan Faneca and Damien Woody will have to lead the way

By Dennis Dillon

This is the time of year when NFL players build chemistry by pumping iron in the weight room, running plays on the practice field during OTAs and chowing down at restaurants such as Riodizio Churrascaria in Roslyn Heights, N.Y.

A 10-minute drive from Hofstra University, the Brazilian steakhouse is a hungry man's dream. Its bill of fare includes more than 20 varieties of select meats, including top sirloin, rib eye, flank steak, beef short ribs, leg of lamb, pork sausage and turkey wrapped in bacon.

Professional carvers deliver entrees to tables on skewers and continue carving portions until patrons flip a card from the green (go) side to the red (stop) side.

One late afternoon in early May, 15 empty stomachs walked through the door: Jets quarterbacks Chad Pennington and Brett Ratliff, plus 13 of their biggest friends—offensive linemen all. They put some tables together, talked about their families, listened to stories told by Alan Faneca and Damien Woody and ate until they could eat no more.

When it came to player cravings this offseason, the Jets were among the league's most ravenous teams. They signed seven veteran free agents, including Faneca and Woody; traded for another veteran, nose tackle Kris Jenkins; and drafted six players. After a 4-12 season, a team can't satisfy its hunger with an appetizer or two; it needs a bunch of main courses.

None of the additions will play a more important role than Faneca, the Jets' new left guard, and Woody, their new right tackle, who have 19 years of NFL experience combined. Faneca was an



FROM LEFT: AL PERDRA / GETTY IMAGES; JOHN DUN FOR SN



Faneca and Woody (left) are being counted on to give the Jets' offensive line a tougher look.

anchor on the Steelers' line for 10 seasons, made 153 starts and helped Pittsburgh win Super Bowl 40. Woody, who won two Super Bowl rings in New England, is a versatile lineman who has started at center, guard and tackle.

These two players don't just bring skill, experience and leadership to the line. They also bring a dimension that was lacking last season.

"What they've added is some physical presence," says the defensive coordinator of an AFC East rival. "They're going to be the running team they wanted to be a year ago."

The Jets struggled to run the ball effectively in 2007, Thomas Jones' first season as their feature back. They ranked 19th in the league in rushing yards and 23rd in average gain per rush. Coach Eric Mangini wants Jones and change-of-pace back Leon Washington to be able to run the ball in September and December, in the heat and the cold, at home and away ... even when the opponent knows they're going to run. The additions of Faneca (who replaces Adrien Clarke) and Woody (who takes over for Anthony Clement) should allow them to do that.

"I think they're both inherently tough guys," Mangini says. "They've got that same attitude that when it's fourth-and-1 or third-and-1—they want to run the ball, and they want it run behind them."

The passing attack also sagged last season, a victim of 53 sacks (19 more than in 2006) and too

many quarterback pressures. The Jets run a multiple-look offense that can challenge a defense with its myriad formations, motions and shifts. But it won't matter whether Pennington, Kellen Clemens or Joe Namath is the quarterback if he doesn't have time to throw.

After going 10-6 and making the playoffs in 2006, Mangini's first season, the Jets finished 12 games—12!—behind New England last year. They won't close that gap overnight, but if Faneca and Woody perform up to expectations, the Jets could at least get back in the Patriots' rearview mirror in 2008.

When the Jets' offseason program began in mid-March, center Nick Mangold found himself migrating toward Faneca almost immediately. Mangold noticed Faneca's work ethic in the weight room and the rituals he follows to keep his body in top shape. When OTAs began, Mangold saw Faneca carry that same approach to the practice field.

"You see that," Mangold says, "and you want to be at that level."

The Jets want Faneca, who has gone to the last seven Pro Bowls, to be a rock between Mangold and left tackle D'Brickashaw Ferguson—Nick and Brick—third-year players who have started since their rookie seasons. Mentor? Faneca will be glad to play that role "if they so choose and if they need

it." Right now, though, he's still learning the Jets' offense, its different calls, tendencies of his new linemates—and the maze that is the New York-area highway system.

For 10 years, black-and-gold blood flowed through Faneca, 31, who missed only two games with Pittsburgh. "You spend 10 years somewhere, you get used to your routine, where everything is. It's definitely a new phase," says Faneca, who first was struck by the realization he was in a new environment when he saw the green carpet inside the Jets locker room at their training facility on Hofstra's campus.

Ferguson, who has been impressed by how Faneca "pushes himself" in the weight room and in on-field drills, regards him not so much as a tutor but as a player who can offer experiences and solutions to problems. Ferguson calls them "pearls of wisdom."

An outsider might look at Faneca's resume and presume he could become a bit of a know-it-all. That conclusion couldn't be further from the truth.

"The guys around here haven't been with me the last 10 years," he says. "I've got to come in here and earn their respect and show them firsthand."

Says Ferguson: "He's an interactive guy. He's very approachable. Because he has that type of attitude, he really blends in well with the guys we have."

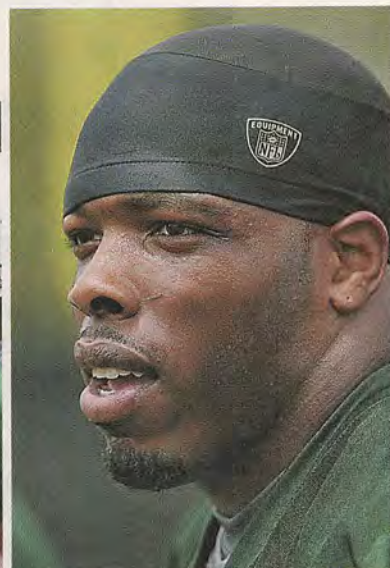
When the offensive starters are taking a break

4-12 means you need reinforcements

Alan Faneca and Damien Woody aren't the only prominent players the Jets added to help them rebound from last season's 4-12 record. Look for these five to play key roles, too.

DE NT Kris Jenkins

He's expected to be the stout man in the middle of their 3-4 defense that Dewayne Robertson wasn't. The Jets want Jenkins to be a run stuffer first and a pass rusher second. "He's a fluid athlete, especially for someone of his size," coach Eric Mangini says. "He makes 360 (pounds) look good."



OLB Calvin Pace

A disappointment as an end early in his career, Pace has thrived as a pass rusher since switching to linebacker. He had 6½ sacks for the Cardinals last season.



'I think they're both inherently tough guys. When it's fourth-and-1 or third-and-1, they want to run the ball and they want it run behind them.' —Jets coach Eric Mangini, describing Alan Faneca and Damien Woody

on the practice field, it's not uncommon to see Faneca, Mangold and Ferguson standing together, talking shop. They might discuss a better way to block on a specific play. Mangold might ask Faneca how he likes to pull on a sweep. Or Faneca might ask Ferguson about when he needs help double-teaming an end. It's called taking mental reps.

"We're going through things back and forth—each other's tendencies, how we're used to doing something," Faneca says. "We're kind of walking that line back and forth of practicing it and then reviewing and talking about it, so when we come back the next time we're a little more in sync and, hopefully, doing it a little bit better."

A line comprises five players at different positions who must work in concert for the offense to be successful. Think of it as a dance troupe; if one of the performers is out of step, the routine can fall apart.

That's why it's important for Faneca and Woody to continue bonding with Mangold, Ferguson and right guard Brandon Moore. The more they learn about one another now, the easier it will be to

function effectively this season.

"It's not something that happens overnight or in a week or two," Faneca says. "You can't just sit back and let it happen over time. It's something each of us has to work at to get to that point."

Ferguson has more in common with Woody than the fact they are bookend linemen. Each drives a Mercedes CL. Ferguson's is black charcoal with tinted-out taillights and chrome wheels; Woody has a white coupe with white rims. "We've got the style game on," Ferguson says, a reference, perhaps, to a Jets version of *Pimp My Ride*.

The Jets will be happy if Woody, 30, just pimps their line. He is projected to start at right tackle even though he is a novice at that position, having played there only in the last five games last season for the Lions.

"Really? That's kind of surprising," says the AFC East defensive coordinator. "I'm not saying he can't play tackle—obviously, those guys know what they're doing—but I thought he would have been

the right guard. It'll be interesting to see how he performs out there at tackle."

Mangini, who was an assistant coach for the Patriots during four of Woody's five seasons in New England, studied tape of Woody's games at right tackle last season and is convinced he can be a difference-maker there.

Let's see. A new starter at left guard. A new starter at right tackle. Oh, yeah, the Jets also have a new offensive line coach in Bill Callahan. The former coach of the Oakland Raiders and University of Nebraska is focusing on technique as he directs the Jets' linemen. So how's it going, maestro?

"I've only been here three months," says Callahan, whose official title is assistant head coach/offense. "We're just trying to put one foot in front of the other right now. It's been a pretty seamless transition because we've been working in the off-season program. ... But it's too early to say anything about where we're at. We have a long ways to go."

With Faneca and Woody aboard, the journey should be much more comfortable. **SN**



TE Bubba Franks

Look for the Jets to make this former Packer a key part of their red zone offense.

QB Tony Richardson

Throughout his career, first in Kansas City and then in Minnesota, Richardson has consistently blocked his targets. The Jets use multiple offensive packages, so Richardson should get a lot of playing time.



AL PEREIRA / GETTY IMAGES (5)

OLB/DE Vernon Gholston

The Jets plan to maximize the production of their top draft pick by playing him at linebacker in their base defense and moving him to end in pass-rushing situations.

Better together

The Jaguars needed to upgrade their secondary and Drayton Florence needed a new start. This free-agent marriage could go a long way toward shifting the balance of power in the AFC. *By Clifton Brown*

Unlike some cornerbacks, Drayton Florence relishes confrontations with Peyton Manning and Tom Brady.

Playing for the Chargers, Florence was on the winning side in his last three games against Manning and the Colts. Against Brady and New England, Florence has two interceptions in two playoff games, including a pick in last season's AFC championship game loss.

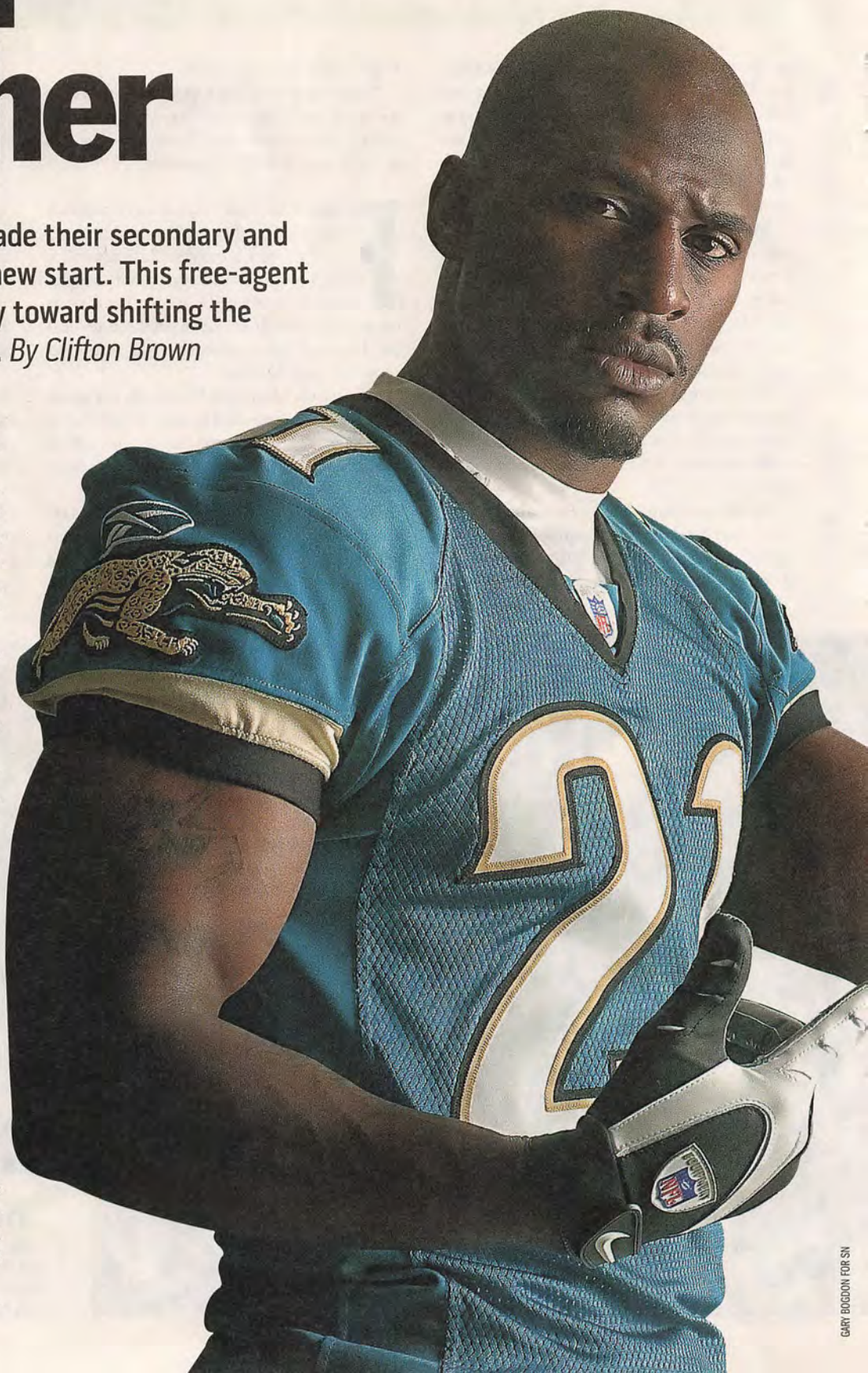
No wonder the Jaguars believe Florence is their kind of guy. They signed him to a six-year, \$36 million contract this offseason, hoping his presence will help the Jaguars become kingpins of the AFC.

Florence needed a change of scenery after losing his starting job with the Chargers last season. He was beaten out by Antonio Cromartie, who led the NFL with 10 interceptions, so that was no disgrace. Losing a starting job to Cromartie is like losing a beauty contest to Halle Berry. And to coach Jack Del Rio, Florence looks awfully good in a Jaguars uniform.

"This is a move that will significantly strengthen our secondary," says Del Rio. "Drayton is entering the prime of his career, and he's a real good fit for our team."

Under new coordinator Gregg Williams, the Jaguars want to improve a pass defense that ranked 15th in the NFL last season. Opponents exposed their timid pass rush and tentative secondary, and attacking through the air became the best way to beat the Jaguars. In particular, Manning and Brady picked on Jacksonville like schoolyard bullies. Manning threw five touchdown passes in two wins against the Jaguars, and Brady ended their season by completing 26 of 28 passes in a divisional playoff game.

Now the Jaguars have a deeper and more ver-



satellite secondary, although Del Rio has been coy about Florence's exact role. During offseason workouts, Florence has been the starting right corner and 2006 Pro Bowl selection Rashean Mathis the starting left corner, with Brian Williams moving from corner to safety.

Florence was thrilled when the Jaguars pounced on him early in free agency. He grew up in Ocala, Fla., about a 2-hour drive from Jacksonville, and his cross-country move will give family and friends an opportunity to support him at home games. And he'll still be playing for a contender.

"As soon as I got to Jacksonville, I met with Shack Harris," says Florence, referring to James Harris, the Jaguars' vice president of player personnel. "I said, 'Shack, I don't want to go anywhere else. I want to play here. Let's make this deal.'"

Florence has a habit of making quick impressions on people. He played his first two college seasons at Tennessee-Chattanooga, but his career blossomed after he transferred to Tuskegee, where he was taught by defensive backs coach Antonio Knight.

"My relationship with Drayton started when I heard about another player who was thinking about transferring from Chattanooga," says Knight, now the defensive backs coach at Jackson State. "But when I was talking to this other player, he told me that Drayton might also want to transfer. It's funny—I don't even remember who the other player was. But I remember Drayton.

"Drayton has always been one of these guys you didn't have to motivate. He'd come by the office in the morning, wanting to work on something. He'd work after practice. He'd work hard in the offseason. I'm not surprised he made it to the NFL. What surprises me is that he hasn't made a Pro Bowl."

Florence, 27, would love to go to Hawaii, but what he really covets is a Super Bowl trip. The Chargers finished one victory away last season, and getting that close has only fueled Florence's thirst for a championship.

One of the Jaguars' main

goals is to end Indianapolis' five-year reign as AFC South champion. With Florence, they look more equipped to defend the Colts, who love to spread receivers all over the field. Reggie Wayne caught 17 passes during two victories against the Jaguars last season, at times making it look as if nobody was covering him. Wayne vs. Williams was a mismatch, but Florence is looking forward to seeing Wayne and the Colts twice a season.

"The Colts can run the ball, but they're not going to beat you with the run," he says. "Peyton's going to beat you by throwing it. If you can cover his receivers that split second longer, it gives the rush a little more time to smack him in the mouth. That's when you can have some success against him. That's what we were able to do in San Diego."

Jacksonville's improvement on defense doesn't rest solely on Florence, of course. The Jaguars used their first two draft picks on pass rushers, Derrick Harvey and Quentin Groves. Combine their pursuit of the quarterback with Florence's help locking down receivers and the pass defense figures to be much less porous.

Florence is not lacking for speed, size (6-1, 195) or athleticism, but he believes preparation is far more important than physical ability. He says he watches more film than a movie critic, studying quarterbacks, receivers and their tendencies.

"At this level, everybody has skills, everybody can play," says Florence. "No matter how much you train or work out, you're only going to get so

strong, you're only going to be able to run so fast.

"What separates you from the next guy is your mind. You see a certain formation, you recognize a certain tendency, and you process it before the play even happens. That's how you get to a certain spot before the receiver. That's how you can make big plays."

Florence's preparation paid off before he was drafted, when he trained for the Scouting Combine by working out with Randy Moss and his personal trainer. After impressing scouts at the Combine, he was selected by the Chargers with the 46th pick overall in the 2003 draft, the highest spot ever for a Tuskegee player. That was a good year for corners. Others taken in that draft include Terence Newman (No. 5, Cowboys), Marcus Trufant (No. 11, Seahawks), Nnamdi Asomugha (No. 31, Raiders) and Mathis (No. 39, Jaguars).

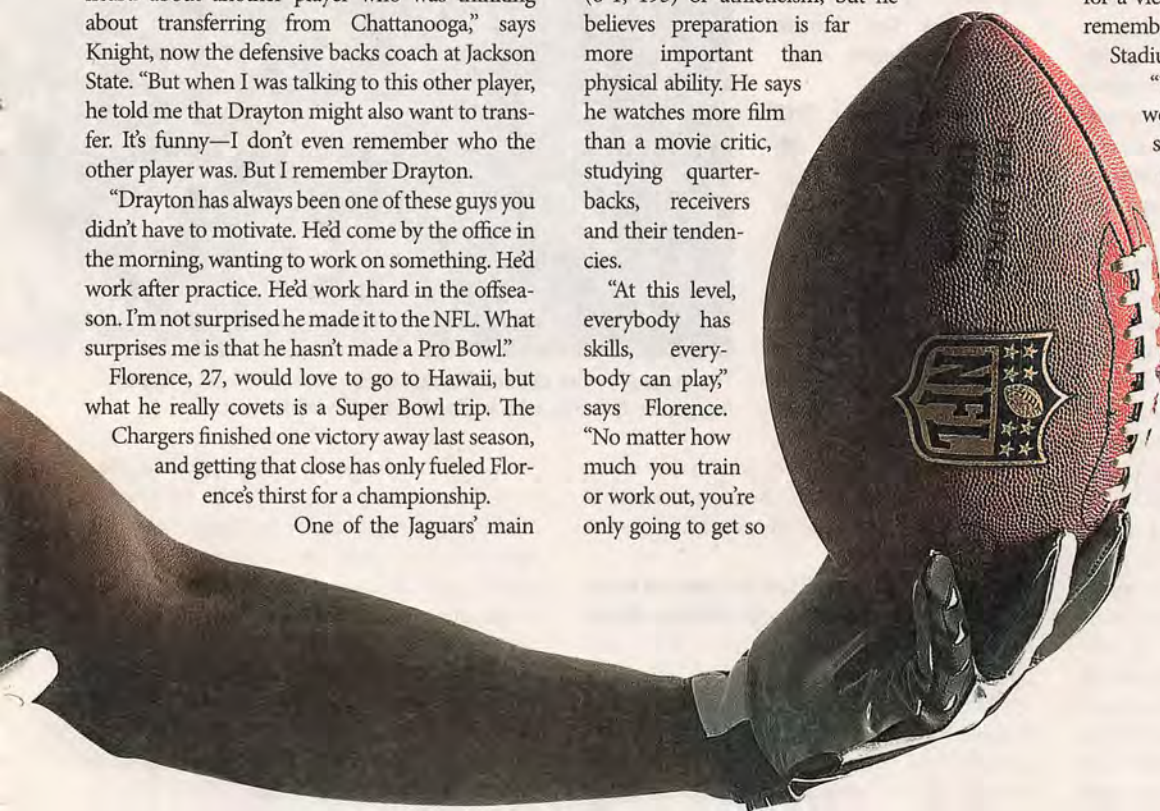
"Drayton has never been afraid of competition," says Knight. "I guarantee that competing against Drayton out in San Diego helped make Cromartie a better player."

Florence, who has 10 career interceptions in the regular season, would trade his picks against Brady for a victory against him in the playoffs. He still remembers the disappointment of leaving Gillette Stadium last January.

"We had a good season, but we felt we were good enough to win a Super Bowl," says Florence. "That's the same way I feel about the Jaguars. We're good enough to do it. The defense is solid. The offense has playmakers. The coaching staff is solid. You look at all the places I could have landed and Jacksonville is the perfect spot. Everything is in place.

"That's why I'm not worried about my role. I'm just happy to be on a contender. So many guys play their entire career and never reach the Super Bowl. That's not me. I don't want to be one of those guys."

SN



'If you can cover Manning's receivers that split second longer, it gives the rush a little more time to smack him in the mouth. That's when you can have some success against him.' —Drayton Florence

Steals—not to mention home runs and RBIs—can be found in the offseason trade market with a lot of research and a little bit of luck.

A fleecing of the D-backs has the White Sox looking good

By Sean Deveney

sdeveney@sportingnews.com

Carlos Quentin is a serious dude. Every day, he comes into the White Sox clubhouse and sticks to the same routine—weights, stretching, hitting. He prefers not to be distracted. In the run-up to game time, he checks the lineup card. It's a habit he got into last year with the Diamondbacks, when he started the season with a nagging shoulder injury, later hurt his hamstring and was replaced by Justin Upton. With Chris Young in center and Eric Byrnes in left, Quentin often wasn't in the lineup at all.

In Chicago, Quentin's spot is assured. He's tied for the American League lead in home runs and is second in RBIs. After hitting mostly in the seventh spot, Quentin was bumped to No. 3 in mid-May, a move that triggered a run of 12 wins in 15 games. Still, he checks that lineup card daily. "It's kind of a habit now," Quentin says, smiling.

If he seems excessively insecure, consider that the source of the insecurity has been the key to the success Quentin—and the Sox—has had this year. Because the Diamondbacks had no place for Quentin, they were willing to deal him at a bargain price. Chicago general manager Ken Williams acquired Quentin for Class A first baseman Chris Carter (who was later dealt to Oakland in the Dan Haren trade). Says manager Ozzie Guillen, "I didn't even know who he was when we traded for him, but Kenny told me if this kid's healthy, he's going to help you win games."

Lacking a deep pool of free agents, last year's offseason was driven by trades. Some—the Haren bonanza, the Josh Hamilton-Edinson Volquez swap, the protracted Johan Santana deal—have paid dividends for both teams. Others, like the Marlins-Tigers trade that sent Miguel Cabrera and Dontrelle Willis to Detroit, will take years to judge. But then there are trades like the one that brought Quentin to Chicago, an

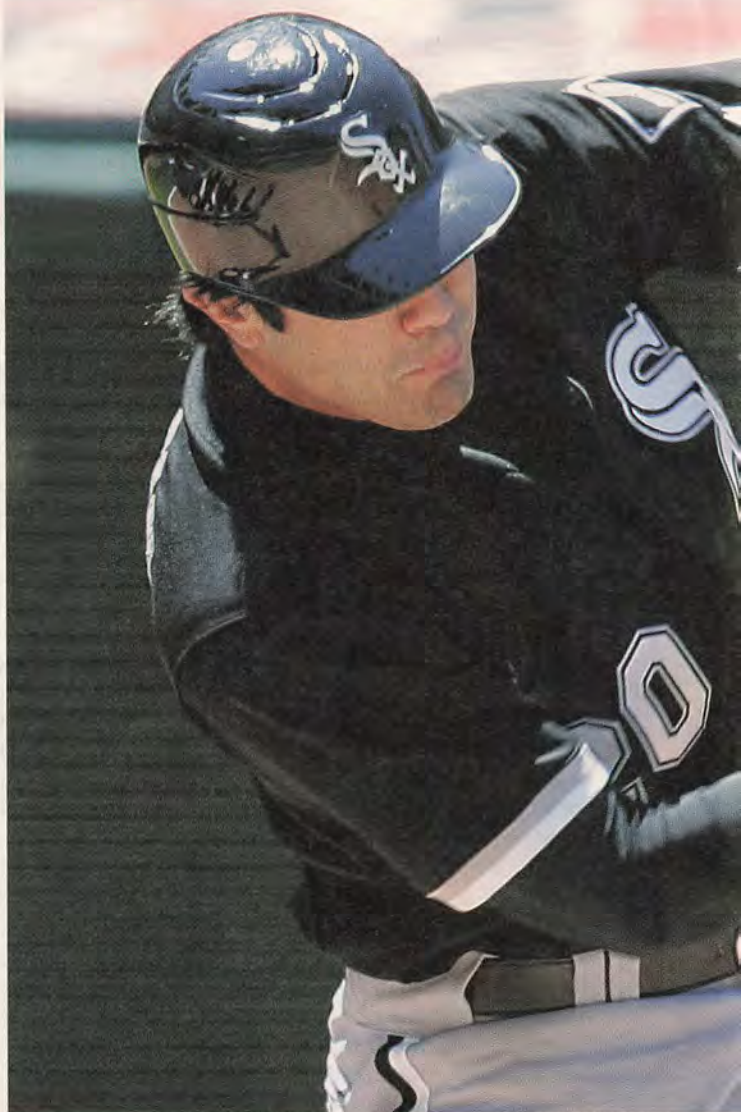
utterly lopsided offseason deal. While Quentin is barreling toward the All-Star game, Carter is in Class A, batting .211. That puts the Sox atop the list of the biggest offseason steals.

■ **White Sox acquire Quentin for Carter.** A no-brainer.

■ **Phillies acquire RHP Brad Lidge for OF Michael Bourn.** It's unlikely Lidge would be pitching the way he is (two earned runs in 22 appearances) if he were still in Houston, where he struggled badly in 2006 and '07. He has recovered control of his devastating slider and even added a new wrinkle by changing speeds on it. That has made him an anchor for what has been the best bullpen in the league. Bourn can run, but whether he'll ever hit enough to put his speed to use remains a question.

■ **Braves acquire RHP Jair Jurrjens and minor league OF Gorkys Hernandez for SS Edgar Renteria.** The trade that is killing the Tigers this year is not the deal that brought Cabrera and Willis from the Marlins for a raft of prospects. It's the late-October deal that sent Jurrjens and Hernandez, a center field prospect, to Atlanta for Renteria. Jurrjens, 22, has slipped lately but has been a god-send for Atlanta overall, keeping the starting rotation solid through a rash of injuries.

■ **Mets acquire C Brian Schneider and OF Ryan Church for OF Lastings Milledge.** The Mets haven't had the same primary right fielder for back-to-back years since Butch Huskey in



The surplus in the Diamondbacks' outfield was the best thing to happen to Quentin, who is starring for the White Sox.

1997-98. Church should change that. The Mets moved perennial prospect Milledge for Church, who has dealt with concussion problems but still started the year hitting .309. Schneider doesn't hit much but has thrown out 41.7 percent of runners attempting to steal. Milledge, meanwhile, is hitting .246 for the Nationals.

■ **Orioles acquire LHP George Sherrill, OF Adam Jones and prospects for LHP Erik Bedard.** Jones and Bedard were the principals in this deal, but Sherrill has had the biggest impact, as Baltimore's closer. The Orioles' bullpen, 29th in relief ERA last year, ranks seventh this year, thanks in large part to Sherrill. Bedard has, as usual, missed time with an injury, and he has been erratic for Seattle. There's an added bonus for Baltimore: Righty Chris Tillman, acquired in the deal, is 6-0 at Class AA.

SN



The Rays were atop Sean Deveney's power poll last week. See where they stand now at sportingnews.com.



speedreads

Got to be pulling for Rocco Baldelli, who has taken heaps of criticism for his inability to stay healthy. This spring, it was revealed that Baldelli has a mitochondrial disorder that causes fatigue, and he was placed on the 60-day D.L. Now, though, Baldelli is back and working on his timing in extended spring training. He should join one of the Rays' minor league clubs soon.

Far too much has been made of the impact of Dontrelle Willis' struggles on the Tigers. Willis, who returned this week after a rehab stint, was brought in as the No. 5 starter. How many teams' fates revolve around the performance of their fifth starter?



Bruce, the reigning Sporting News minor league player of the year, tore it up in his first week in the majors—and got a little love in return.

>INSIDE DISH

Credit White Sox G.M. **Ken Williams** for the **Carlos Quentin** trade, and he also deserves a thumbs-up for two moves that were widely panned—giving four years and \$19 million to middle reliever **Scott Linebrink** and two years, \$11 million to

RHP **Octavio Dotel**. Last year, the Sox had no bridge to closer **Bobby Jenks**, but Linebrink has been among the majors' best setup men, ranking fourth in holds. Dotel battled injuries in recent years but has a live arm. After a slow start, he has posted a 1.69 ERA and struck out 27 batters in 16.0 innings since April 26. Ironically, the bigger-name players Williams acquired this winter—OF **Nick Swisher** and SS **Orlando Cabrera**—have struggled. > Reds fans finally got CF **Jay Bruce** in Cincinnati, and, in a way, it was a mixed blessing. Bruce had an unbelievable first five games, hitting .579 and reaching base 17 times in 25 plate appearances. But why did the Reds have to suffer with CF **Corey Patterson** and his .200 average for two months? The decision had nothing to do with Bruce's future arbitration date, as some have theorized—Bruce is what's called a "Super 2" player, and his arbitration is still undetermined. "It's **Dusty Baker**," says an N.L. executive. "He always gives a shot to one of his guys ahead of a rookie. And Patterson was one of his guys." > In an effort to go deeper in games, Astros RHP **Roy Oswalt** has been trying to pitch to contact, hoping ground-ball outs will be easier on his arm. "Strikeouts are nice, but usually if you strike out guys you last only five or six innings," he says. Because of that, Oswalt has been relying more on his slider and throwing fewer fastballs. The results, though, have been disappointing. Oswalt has a 5.45 ERA, and, according to Stats LLC, he is averaging 16.0 pitches per inning, the most of his career. > One of the stars of last year's Red Sox bullpen, LHP **Hideki Okajima**, is putting up sterling numbers: an 0.72 ERA and a .191

opponents' batting average. But the numbers are deceiving. Okajima has done a terrible job with runners on base, allowing 11 of 14 inherited runners to score. His percentage in that category (78.6) is the worst in baseball. > Hoping your team can get a blockbuster arm at the trading deadline this season? Don't count on it. Multiple sources say the two biggest upcoming free-agent pitchers—Indians LHP **C.C. Sabathia** and Brewers RHP **Ben Sheets**—won't be available

this summer, even if extension talks go nowhere. Says one team executive: "It seems like both of those teams think they can re-sign those guys and don't need to make a trade under pressure." Dodgers RHP **Derek Lowe**, though, could be available.

THE CLOSER

Todd Jones



An admission: The draft makes us think of long-term job security

Major leaguers look at this week's draft differently than fans do. We see kids who eventually will replace us. Baseball is a young man's sport, and these guys' ability to win big league jobs someday hits us all at some point.

I have friends who are scouting directors, and, for them, the draft is a culmination of an 18-month process. Scouts beat the bushes all over the world trying to find guys.

American kids are in a good place and a bad place. The bad: U.S. kids—and those from Canada and U.S. territories such as Puerto Rico—are the only players who are subject to the draft. Players from the rest of the world can sign as free agents. That means all clubs can bid on their services, giving those players—in theory, anyway—more bargaining power. Because Americans have no say in where they're picked or who picks them, clubs have tremendous leverage.

There is an advantage to being drafted: a signing bonus. Even a midround pick is able to get more than the majority of Latin players, who can be signed for as little as a new pair of shoes and a spot in an academy.

For the top prospects, the draft is a celebration of a job well done. The kids have been given the ability to play baseball and play it well. They get their signing bonus and a Nike shoe deal, an Oakley contract and maybe an Easton deal, and they're on their way. Sure, their representatives—wink, wink—will beat up the club for extra perks, but then it's off to the bushes to pursue a dream.

The days before the draft can be agonizing. Clubs need to know who they are drafting now more than ever. These kids have taken tests and thrown bullpens or put on private workouts for all the clubs that are interested. Their parents long ago altered their lives to help their sons make it big. And now there's a house full of family and friends hanging around, waiting for the phone to ring.

Even with all the research that goes into scouting these days, the draft remains a crapshoot. You can have all the tools, but if you don't have enough heart, you'll never make it. And that's one thing you can't measure on a test.

Todd Jones, who signed with the Astros organization after being picked 27th overall in the 1989 draft, offers more baseball expertise at sportingnews.com.

The week ahead

June 6-8

Double trouble for the A's

Angels manager Mike Scioscia set up his rotation to have righthanders John Lackey and Ervin Santana start at Oakland. Since the beginning of the 2005 season, Lackey and Santana are a combined 17-4 with a 2.00 ERA against the Athletics.

The Phils hit—period

Starting with a series in Atlanta, the Phillies dive into a treacherous stretch in which they play 18 of 24 games on the road. Philadelphia's Citizens Bank Park is a bandbox—the club has 46 home runs and a .471 slugging percentage there, which rank first and tied for second, respectively, among home figures in the National League—but the team hits well elsewhere, too. The Phils have 37 homers and a .444 slugging mark on the road, both second in the league.

Juicy results at Minute Maid

Houston opens a nine-game homestand against St. Louis. One reason for the Astros' recovery from early-season troubles is the

success of Lance Berkman and Carlos Lee at Minute Maid Park. In 24 home games, Berkman and Lee have 11 homers and 46 RBIs combined. The Astros have won 12 of their past 16 home games.

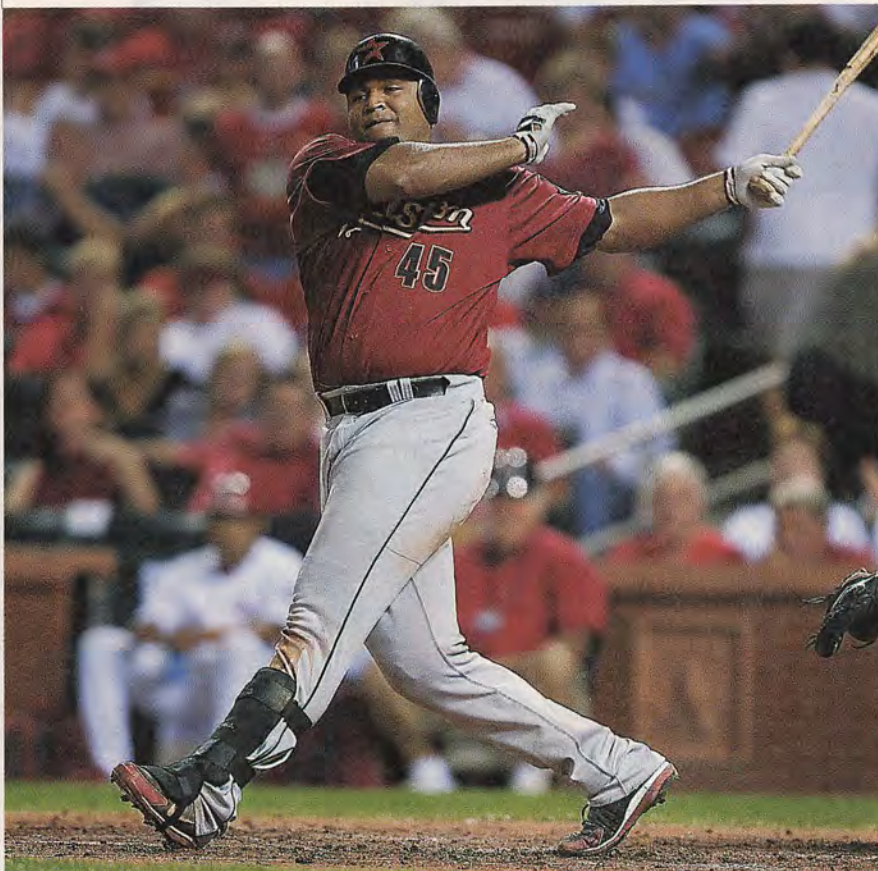
Hernandez gives the M's a chance

The Mariners take a raging case of Fenwayphobia into Boston. Seattle has lost 15 of its past 20 games at Fenway Park, a stretch in which Mariners pitchers have been rocked for a 5.43 ERA. Some good news for the M's: Righthander Felix Hernandez, who has a 1-hit shutout in his only career appearance in Boston, is scheduled to start during the series.

June 6-9

A-Rod welcomes the Royals

The Royals' arrival at Yankee Stadium means it's time for Alex Rodriguez to pad his statistics. Since joining the Yankees in 2004, he has hit .331 with a .636 slugging percentage, 10 homers and 26 RBIs in 118 at-bats against Kansas City. The Yankees are 25-9 against the Royals in that span. —Gerry Fraley



Lee's healthy cuts are helping the Astros get well after the team's slow start.

Dodger blue-chippers

Fate and sheer talent have given outfielders Andre Ethier and Matt Kemp a chance to play every day—and they're cashing in *By Kevin Baxter*

Dodgers general manager Ned Colletti looked like a guy who had spent \$36 million on a one-legged center fielder. Andruw Jones was having knee problems, and his horrendous performance at the plate made matters even worse. Then came word that Jones needed surgery to repair torn cartilage and would be sidelined four to six weeks.

There is, however, a bright side.

"This will solve, for the time being at least," Colletti says with a tired smile, "that four-outfielder problem I keep being reminded about."

And that's a good thing. Because with Jones and his .165 batting average on the disabled list, the Dodgers have no choice but to play fast-emerging Andre Ethier and Matt Kemp every day—not just a lot of the time. Kemp and Ethier "have to play five, six days a week," a major league scout says. "The only way you get better is by playing."

The numbers certainly bear that out. Ethier batted .329 in April after playing regularly as a corner outfielder. Then, after slumping in early May while being platooned to create playing time for Kemp and Juan Pierre (who has become the main guy in left), Ethier became a lineup fixture again on May 15. In late May, he had four consecutive multihit games and was batting .303 entering the week.

Kemp, who is settling in as Jones' replacement after being used in center and right, is hitting .301 and is tied for second on the club in RBIs with 29. He is tied for second in the majors with seven outfield assists.

"I want to play every day—just like anybody would want to play every day," says Kemp, who over parts of three big league seasons has a .309 average and a .478 slugging percentage. "Basically, whenever I get my turn to get out there and play, I have to show (something), I have to make them keep me out there every day."

Ethier says the fight for playing time is something that followed him to the Dodgers from Ari-

zona State, where he was All-Pac-10 yet had to earn his spot in the lineup every year.

"This is how it's been all three years for me here," says Ethier, who nonetheless played in 126 games for the Dodgers in 2006 and 153 in 2007. "I don't know if it's stepping up, but it's just learning to deal with the constant competition of having to go out there and prove yourself."

Kemp, 23, was a sixth-round draft choice in 2003. Highly recruited as a basketball player out of Midwest City (Okla.) High School, he is still developing his baseball instincts—which is most evident in his strikeout total (51 in 186 at-bats) and mental gaffes, on the bases and in the outfield. "He hasn't played a lot of baseball, but he has big-time tools," the scout says. "You hope you can get that concentration level (by playing regularly)."

Ethier, 26, was a second-round pick of the Athletics' in '03 and was named player of the year in the Class AA Texas League in 2005. He was the player Oakland gave up to acquire Milton Bradley from the Dodgers after the '05 season.

The performances of Kemp and Ethier early this season caused the logjam in the outfield, with both earning playing time they were unlikely to

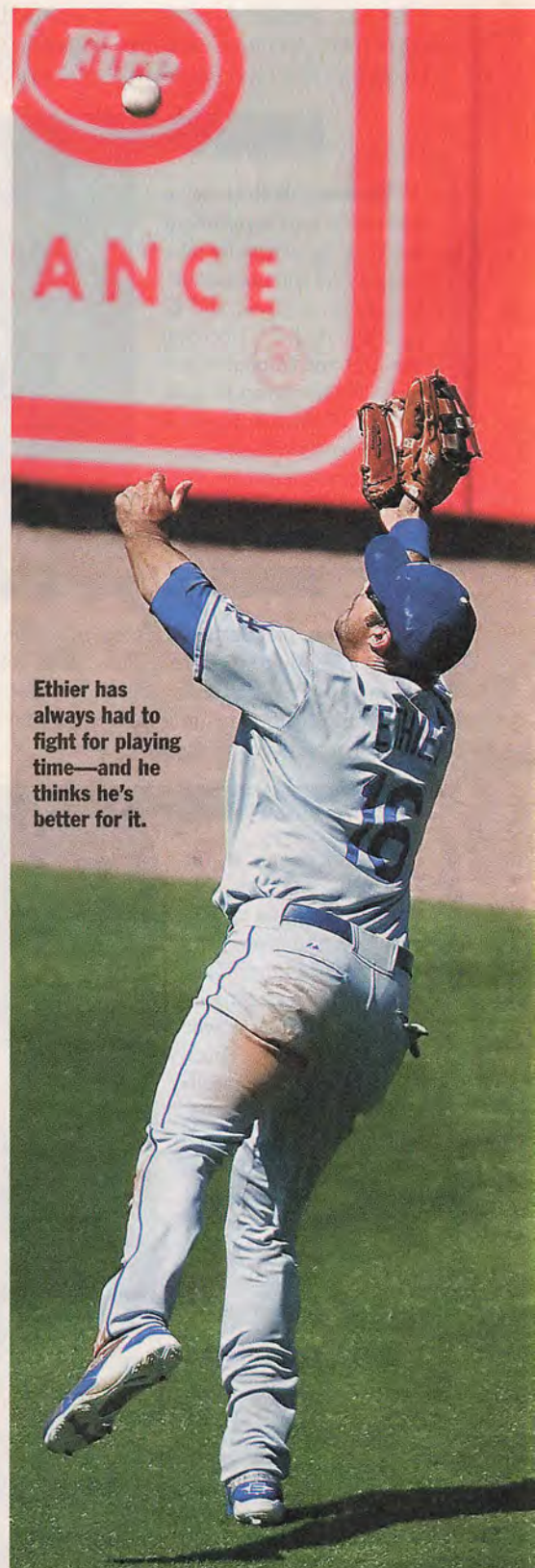
get after Colletti shelled out \$80 million for free agents Jones and Pierre over the past two winters. The Dodgers attempted for a while to trade Pierre but are now glad they couldn't—injuries to Jones and shortstop Rafael Furcal created not only a place for him in the outfield but also a need for his spark at the top of the lineup.

Manager Joe Torre can wrestle with how to use Pierre when Furcal (sidelined indefinitely with a back problem) and Jones come back. But Ethier and Kemp don't appear to be going anywhere. "Kemp has a chance to be an above-average big league player," the scout says. "And Ethier's a young guy who can really hit and is a solid outfielder. To me, they are two of the best young guys in baseball. All they need is a chance."

SN



Kemp needs to work on his concentration, but all the tools are there.



Ethier has always had to fight for playing time—and he thinks he's better for it.

6 things you need to know about ... Giants RHP Tim Lincecum

The Giants considered trading the 23-year-old Lincecum to the Blue Jays in the offseason for right fielder Alex Rios. Giants fans are glad the proposed deal fell through. Lincecum has a 7-1 record, 2.33 ERA and 76 strikeouts—second in the National League.

1 Some people think he's a batboy. "In San Diego, the guy watching the clubhouse door asked, 'Who you waiting for?' I said, 'I'm a player,' and he said, 'Oh, really?'" Lincecum was 4-11 and 85 pounds as a high school freshman. He grew to 5-9, 130 entering college at the University of Washington. Now? "I'm close to 6 feet, I like to think." He's listed as 5-11, but that's a stretch.

2 He loves the Beatles. He's from Washington but doesn't like grunge. He prefers John, Paul, Ringo and George. And Frank Sinatra, anything old school. His dad, Chris, turned him on to music at an early age, and it's not unusual to catch Tim singing the classics.

3 His nickname is The Franchise, not an easy moniker to live up to. Former Giants reliever Steve Kline coined the name based on the high expectations for Lincecum, who won the Golden Spikes Award as amateur baseball's best player, received a \$2.025 million signing bonus and made 13 minor league starts without a loss (6-0, 1.01 ERA). "I don't mind it," Lincecum said. "I haven't heard it too much lately, especially with Kline gone."

4 He regularly throws in the high 90s, but his windup is anything but textbook, making outsiders wonder if he'll remain healthy. These are the mechanics he learned from his dad as a kid, and neither he nor the Giants want to change anything. "I haven't always thrown hard, but eventually my (velocity) caught up with my mechanics," says Lincecum, who wraps his right hand behind his right leg and uses a whipping motion to the plate.

5 His routine is unconventional. He doesn't ice after games. "My dad said ice is good for two things: injuries and his drinks," Lincecum says. Before starts, unlike most pitchers who wear game faces hours before the first pitch, he'll engage in conversation with anyone in sight, including reporters. But he won't do his Ozzie Smith-like back flips, which he saves for off-days.

6 You can't spell Lincecum without a 'K.' He is the all-time strikeouts leader in the Pac-10 with 491. He struck out 104 hitters in 62⅓ innings in the minor leagues, a remarkable 14.9 per nine innings. He ranked second in the N.L. last season to Jake Peavy at 9.23, and his strikeouts-per-nine inning mark for his first 34 starts is 9.42, fifth among active starters. Of the four pitchers who rank above him—Randy Johnson, Kerry Wood, Scott Kazmir and Johan Santana—only Wood had more strikeouts per nine innings during his first 34 starts. —*The Sports Xchange*



(RUMOR OF THE WEEK)

With starting pitching to trade, the Indians won't have any trouble making deals

Last winter, Indians general manager Mark Shapiro probed the trade market for a corner outfielder because of concerns about his team's offense. Cleveland had acquired Kenny Lofton at the trading deadline to play left field, and Franklin Gutierrez replaced Trot Nixon in right field at about the same time. Lofton was a stopgap, and Gutierrez's ability to play every day was a question. Overall, the Indians needed a slugger to protect against another slump from designated hitter Travis Hafner.

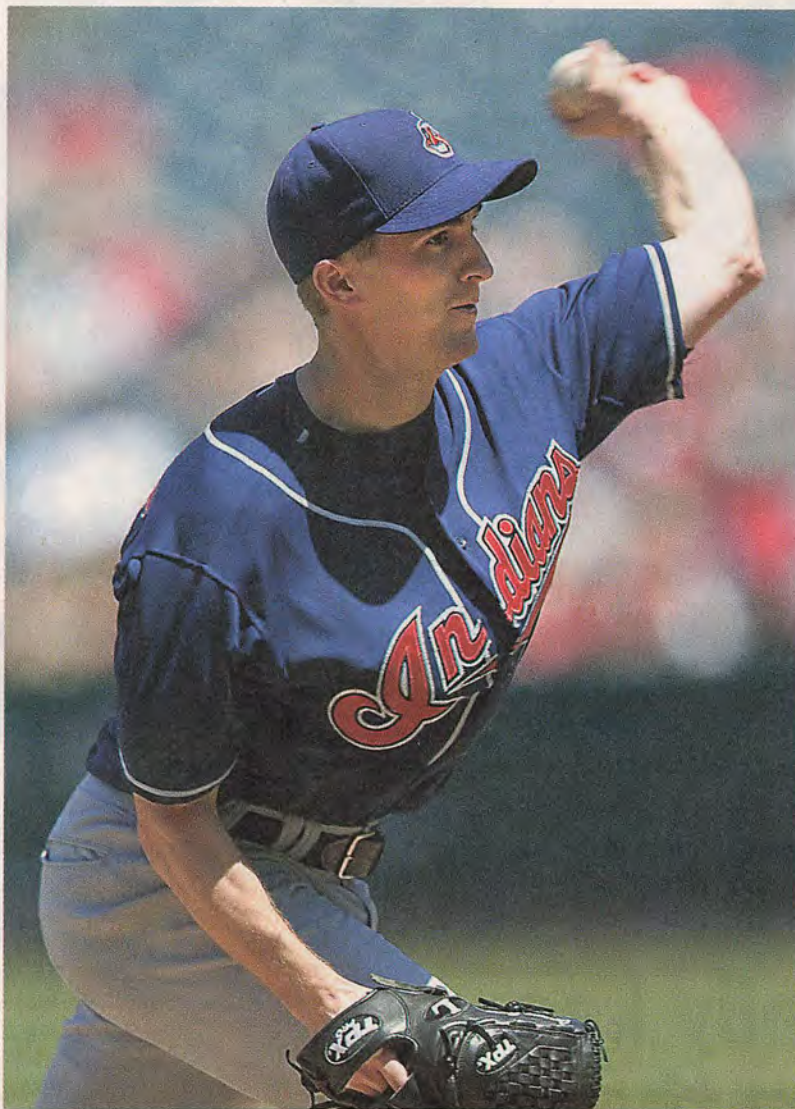
Shapiro talked with the Pirates about Jason Bay. He talked with the Diamondbacks about Carlos Quentin. Nothing came of those discussions, though, and the Indians entered the year with a Jason Michaels-David Dellucci platoon in left field and Gutierrez in right.

Two months into the season, Shapiro's concerns look well-founded. Hafner was still slumping before he landed on the disabled list last week. Michaels has been released, replaced by rookie Ben Francisco.

Gutierrez is hitting .246. And just about everyone else in the lineup has been sucked into a slump, too. The team is last in the American League in batting average, 12th in on-base and slugging percentages.

There's some good news in all of this, though. Cleveland's starting pitching has been so good that the Indians have managed not to fall too far out of contention in the A.L. Central. And with Jake Westbrook healthy, Cliff Lee back in form and 23-year-old Aaron Laffey earning the No. 5 spot in the rotation, the Indians are set behind C.C. Sabathia and Fausto Carmona.

Even with top prospect Adam Miller likely out for the season with a finger injury, that leaves two starters



The Indians may not need Sowers, but plenty of other teams do.

out of the mix for the Indians—Paul Byrd and Jeremy Sowers—and Shapiro has spoken openly about the team's options. As baseball's trading season opens, the Indians are the rare team that can offer quality pitching. They need hitting at all positions, and they're expected to look for deals to improve their bullpen, too.

The Indians, then, could inquire about Bay again. Another possibility: Colorado third baseman Garrett Atkins. Either way, Cleveland's arms will be much in demand. "They're going to come in knowing exactly what they need," says one A.L. executive. "When you come to the table offering pitching, you're going to get what you need." —Sean Deveney

3 UP ▲

1 Russell Martin.

Since his horrid start—Martin's average was .197 after a 1-for-4 game on April 20—the Dodgers catcher has found his stride. He is batting .388 with a .490 on-base percentage in his last 37 games.

2 Manny Ramirez.

Home run No. 500 is a pretty big deal, even for Manny.

3 Rays.

Yep, they're becoming a regular here, but it's hard to ignore the fact that, as June begins, the Rays have the best record in the A.L. Ace Scott Kazmir is absolutely dominating hitters—only 22 hits allowed in 37 innings.

3 DOWN ▼

1 Rockies.

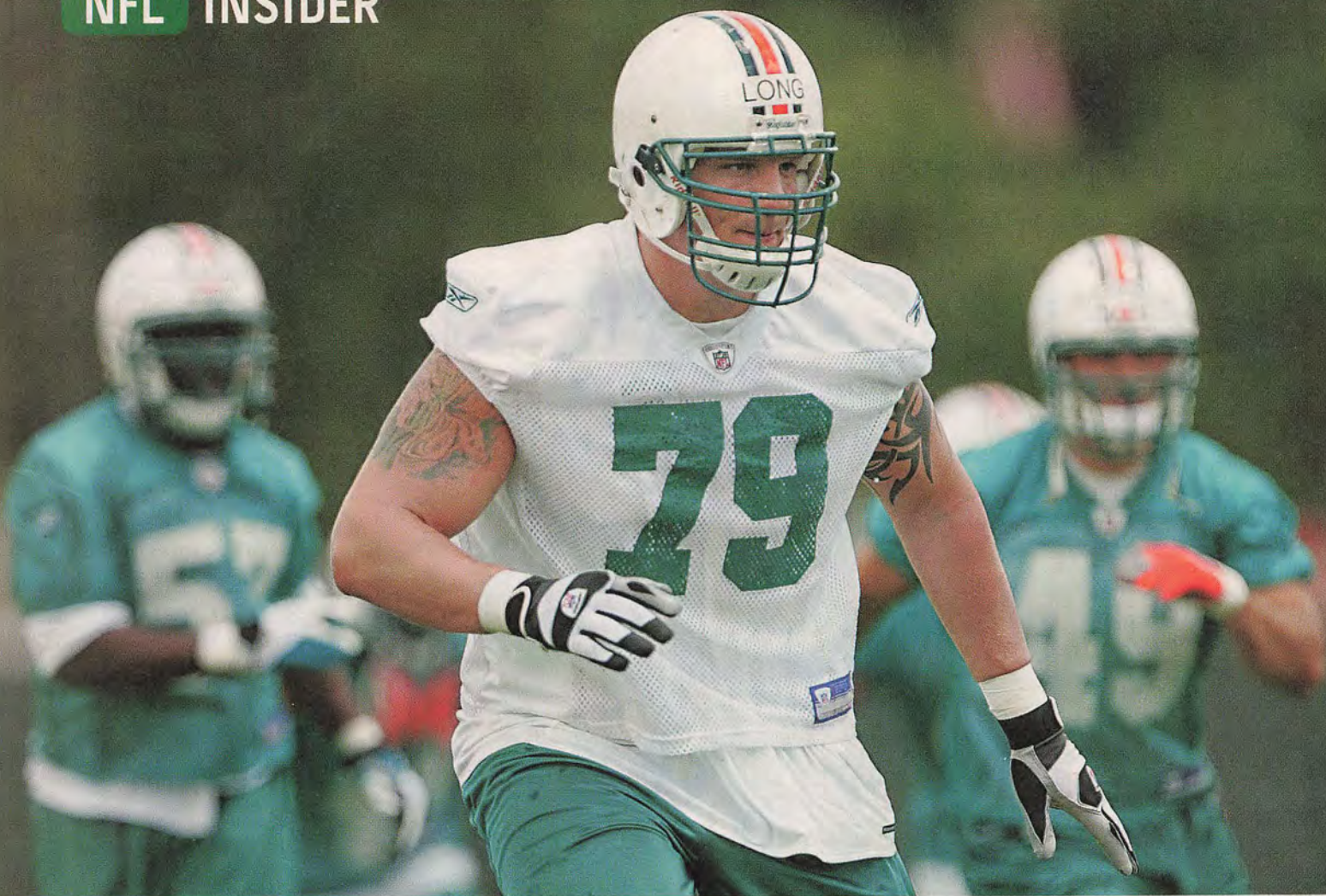
The bottom is falling out for the mile-high team, which entered the week with the worst record in the majors. Injuries are mounting, the pitching staff is struggling, and 8-run leads no longer guarantee victories.

2 Shawn Estes.

You have to feel for Estes, who worked his way back from elbow surgery and had a 3.33 ERA in five games (four starts) for the Padres, then tripped and fractured the thumb on his pitching hand last Friday. He's out indefinitely.

3 Mark Prior.

He's set to have season-ending shoulder surgery. Again. —Ryan Fagan



Now that Long is on the job, Dolphins quarterbacks won't be freight-trained nearly as much this season.

With a talented pack of rookie tackles entering the league, the pocket is about to become a safer place.

Miami finally has an edge on the edge

By Dennis Dillon

ddillon@sportingnews.com

If you want to put a title on this year's draft, call it "The Revenge of the Big Uglies." Eight offensive tackles were selected in the first round; that's as many as were picked in the first round of the previous four drafts combined. Although the draft pushed the patience of wide receivers beyond even the Brady Quinn limit—none were taken in Round 1—offensive

tackles disappeared faster than loaves of bread on a grocery shelf after a forecast calling for heavy snow.

The run on tackles reflected both the quality of talent at the top of that class and the number of teams that needed help at the position.

"This group was talented but not very deep. It's not like there were just an endless amount of tackles out there. If you wanted one, you needed to go out and grab one," says first-year Dolphins coach Tony Sparano, whose team started the stampede by reaching a contract agreement with No. 1 over-

all pick Jake Long several days before the draft.

Ryan Clady was the second tackle taken, with the 12th pick. The parade continued with Chris Williams (14th), Branden Albert (15th), Gosder Cherilus (17th), Jeff Otah (19th), Sam Baker (21st) and Duane Brown (26th).

Since the departure after the 2000 season of Richmond Webb, a seven-time Pro Bowl lineman who started 163 games, seven players have started at left tackle for Miami. The Dolphins are counting on Long to stop the turnstile.

Sparano liked Long before he met him. Watching tape, he noticed Long 10 to 15 yards downfield finishing blocks or trying to make an extra block. Since Long joined the Dolphins' offseason workouts, his athleticism and competitiveness have stood out. Like all rookies, he still needs to get used to the speed of the NFL, but the Dolphins believe he was the best choice for them.

"We were looking for a smart, tough, disciplined player," says Sparano, "and we felt Jake fit all those things."

Offensive tackle used to be one of the most difficult positions to learn to play in the NFL. But

many of the tackles coming into the league now are more physically developed and played in college offenses that passed the ball liberally. So they are more adept at pass blocking.

Like Long, the other first-round tackles weren't picked to be groomed and developed over time. Most are expected to start for their teams when the 2008 season opens.

It could get real ugly out there.

SN

speedreads

I can't think of a better way to honor former cornerback Darrent Williams than to dedicate a memorial teen center in his name, as the Broncos did last week. Williams was killed in a drive-by shooting on January 1, 2007.

OK, men: It has been a great offseason with the trip to the White House and our Super Bowl ring ceremony. Now get your butts back out on the practice field! (Just doing my Tom Coughlin impersonation.)

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

Which players have stood out in offseason workouts? Check out Dennis Dillon's report on sportingnews.com.

And now ... the other seven

Jake Long is already locked in as a starter on the Dolphins' left side. What about the rest of the tackles selected in the first round?

Ryan Clady, Broncos (12th overall). What has stood out about Clady, who is expected to start at left tackle, is his athleticism. Even when slow off the snap count, he's able to use his quickness and footwork to get into position to take on defenders. His "heavy hands" allow him to deliver a punch that knocks opponents off-balance.

Chris Williams, Bears (14th). Williams, who has natural athleticism but needs to get stronger, is competing against John St. Clair at left tackle. The Bears wouldn't have moved John Tait back to the right side if they didn't think Williams could win the job on the other side.

Branden Albert, Chiefs (15th). Albert is agile and moves his feet well for his size (6-5, 316) but must learn the nuances of his new position—he played guard for most of his college career. If he struggles, the Chiefs will move him to right tackle and put Damion McIntosh back on the left side.

Gosder Cherilus, Lions (17th). Cherilus has excellent size, good strength and a mean streak. He's a better run blocker right now, but the coaches believe his pass-blocking issues are related to technique and not slow feet. Look for him to start at right tackle.

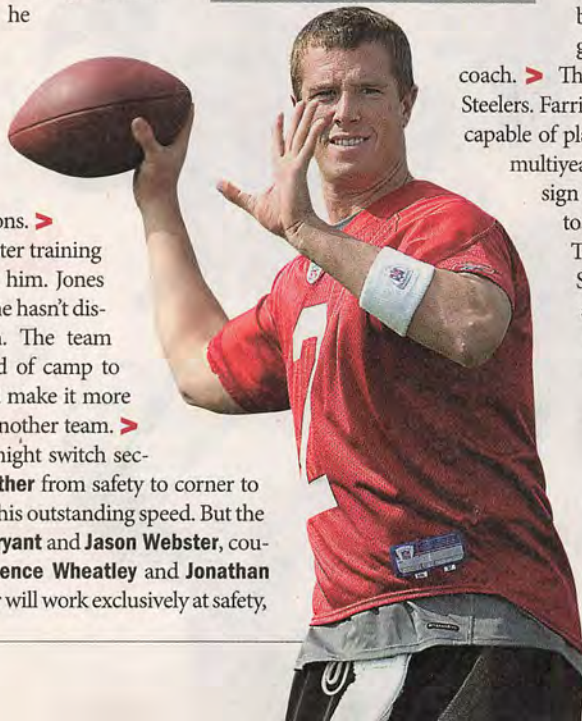
Jeff Otah, Panthers (19th). An ankle injury has limited Otah to working on individual drills. Once he's healthy, he should be able to help the Panthers return to a more power-oriented offense.

Sam Baker, Falcons (21st). He started out behind Quinn Ojinnaka at left tackle but recently started running with the first unit. Baker is a power blocker who should be fine in the running game. He needs to improve his footwork and recognition of stunts and blitz packages.

Duane Brown, Texans (26th). Brown is getting reps with the first unit, which means he's going up against end Mario Williams on a daily basis. He's big and has quick feet, but his technique is raw. He may have trouble beating out incumbent Ephraim Salaam.

The Falcons say there will be an open competition at quarterback, but they want to get rookie **Matt Ryan** on the field as soon as possible. They signed Ryan, the third overall pick in the draft, to a six-year, \$72 million contract with \$34.75 million in guarantees, and they don't plan to have that much money sitting on the sideline. The key to Ryan's progress will be the running game. If it's strong, Ryan can be more of a game manager early in the season until he gets more comfortable in the offense. ➤ Under new coach **John Harbaugh**, the Ravens are viewing ILB **Ray Lewis**, 33, as a situational player who will leave the field more often on third downs and in passing situations. ➤ Unless WR **Matt Jones** has a monster training camp, the Jaguars are likely to cut him. Jones has tremendous natural skills, but he hasn't displayed them consistently enough. The team probably would wait until the end of camp to sever ties with Jones, which would make it more difficult for him to catch on with another team. ➤ There had been talk the Patriots might switch second-year player **Brandon Meriweather** from safety to corner to simplify his reads and capitalize on his outstanding speed. But the signing of veteran CBs **Fernando Bryant** and **Jason Webster**, coupled with the drafting of CBs **Terrence Wheatley** and **Jonathan Wilhite**, makes it likely Meriweather will work exclusively at safety,

INSIDE DISH



where he can inject some much-needed speed into the final line of defense. ➤ It will be interesting to see how new Jets assistant **Bill Callahan** meshes with offensive coordinator **Brian Schottenheimer**. The team brought in Callahan, the former Raiders and Nebraska head coach, primarily to work with the offensive line but gave him the title of assistant head coach/offense. Schottenheimer likes to use a lot of motion and different formations before the snap, but Callahan, who will have input on game plans, ran a no-frills West Coast offense as a head coach. ➤ This could be ILB **James Farrior**'s final season with the Steelers. Farrior, 33, is entering the last year of his contract. He still is capable of playing at a high level, but the team won't sign him to a multiyear deal because of his age. It's possible the Steelers could sign Farrior to a one-year contract at a reduced price, similar to what they did with former RB **Jerome Bettis** in 2005. ➤ Tampa Bay's decision to draft QB **Josh Johnson** out of San Diego was largely the result of legwork done by personnel executive **Doug Williams**. The former Super Bowl 22 MVP, Williams scouted Johnson extensively and concluded he had the skills and intangibles necessary to be successful in coach **Jon Gruden**'s West Coast offense. Johnson is a project, and the Bucs will have Williams working with him in an effort to accelerate his development. —SN correspondents

Add it all up and you have to think Ryan will be on the field sooner rather than later.

AFC

Focus on DEFENSE

1 Patriots When healthy, Richard Seymour is a beast. He demands double- and triple-teams. Ty Warren is too quick for most right tackles and too strong for tight ends. Jarvis Green is a good pass-rush specialist.

2 Colts Robert Mathis and Dwight Freeney, who expects to be fully recovered from a foot injury by the start of the season, form one of the NFL's most disruptive pass-rush duos. Quick rookie Marcus Howard will provide depth.

3 Browns Shaun Rogers and Corey Williams are making the move from 4-3 tackles to 3-4 ends. Rogers (6-4, 357) is huge, strong and agile. Williams has a good motor and is strong against the run. Robaire Smith completes a nice rotation.

4 Chargers Ankle injuries have limited Luis Castillo, who is smart, relentless and quick. Igor Olshansky stayed healthy in 2007 and had his best season; he's a rock against the run. Jacques Cesaire is a do-it-all replacement.

5 Titans Kyle Vanden Bosch isn't just a nonstop pass rusher; he also stuffs the run. Jevon Kearse is back and has looked good in workouts, but it's too early to say what his impact might be. The team lacks depth.

6 Dolphins It isn't hard to understand why the team has resisted trading pass-rushing force Jason Taylor. Without him, the unit is unimpressive. Vonnie Holliday is 32, and newcomer Randy Starks wasn't productive in '07.

7 Bills Relentless Aaron Schobel is the team's only superior edge rusher. Chris Kelsay is a decent bull rusher and is sturdy against the run. Ryan Denney (6-7, 264) has good size and athleticism but is coming off a broken foot.

8 Texans Mario Williams made a statement with 14 sacks in 2007 and should make the Pro Bowl this season. The Texans were unable to add another edge rusher to complement him. Anthony Weaver is capable against the run.

TOP 5

1. Jason Taylor, Dolphins
2. Kyle Vanden Bosch, Titans
3. Mario Williams, Texans
4. Dwight Freeney, Colts
5. Aaron Schobel, Bills

Vanden Bosch isn't just a Pro Bowler—he's a guy the Titans can count on. He has started every game in his three seasons with the team.



9 Broncos Elvis Dumervil (5-11, 250) is a top 10 pass rusher but doesn't have the size to play every snap. Ebenezer Ekuban, coming off an Achilles' injury, will help against the run. Jarvis Moss and Tim Crowder must step up.

10 Bengals With offseason pickup Antwan Odom to complement improving Robert Geathers, the pass rush should be more effective. Odom and Geathers both have the quickness to turn the corner. Depth is an issue.

11 Ravens Because the team runs a hybrid of the 3-4 and 4-3, it has only two true ends: starter Trevor Pryce and backup Dwan Edwards. Pryce is a complete player who knows how to use leverage to keep opponents off him.

12 Steelers Underrated Aaron Smith is strong against the run and tough to get off his feet. Brett Keisel is solid but needs to finish more plays and provide more sacks. The depth is meager.

13 Jaguars The starting duo of Paul Spicer and Reggie Hayward lacks the disruptive ability the team covets. That's why it used its first two picks in the draft to add pass rushers Derrick Harvey and Quentin Groves.

14 Jets Shaun Ellis has lost a step, though he can still come up with an occasional big play. Kenyon Coleman is solid against the run, but the team paid too much to sign him a year ago. Reserve C.J. Mosley has a good motor.

15 Chiefs Tamba Hali, the new featured pass rusher, is relentless but must finish better. The other starter, Alfonso Boone, is moving over from tackle. Backup Turk McBride had a disappointing rookie year.

16 Raiders Derrick Burgess is still a pass-rush threat, though his sacks total dropped from 11 in 2006 to eight last season. Second-year pro Jay Richardson and a couple of cast-offs—Kalimba Edwards (Lions) and Greg Spires (Bucs)—will compete at right end.

NSIVE ENDS

NFC

1 Giants The team's firepower at the position is unmatched. Osi Umenyiora, Michael Strahan and Justin Tuck dominate as pass rushers and run stoppers. Umenyiora might have the quickest first step in the game.

2 Packers Aaron Kampman emerged as an elite pass rusher in 2006 and hasn't slowed down. Cullen Jenkins has all-around ability but must bounce back from a down year. Kabeer Gbaja-Biamila is a threat off the edge.

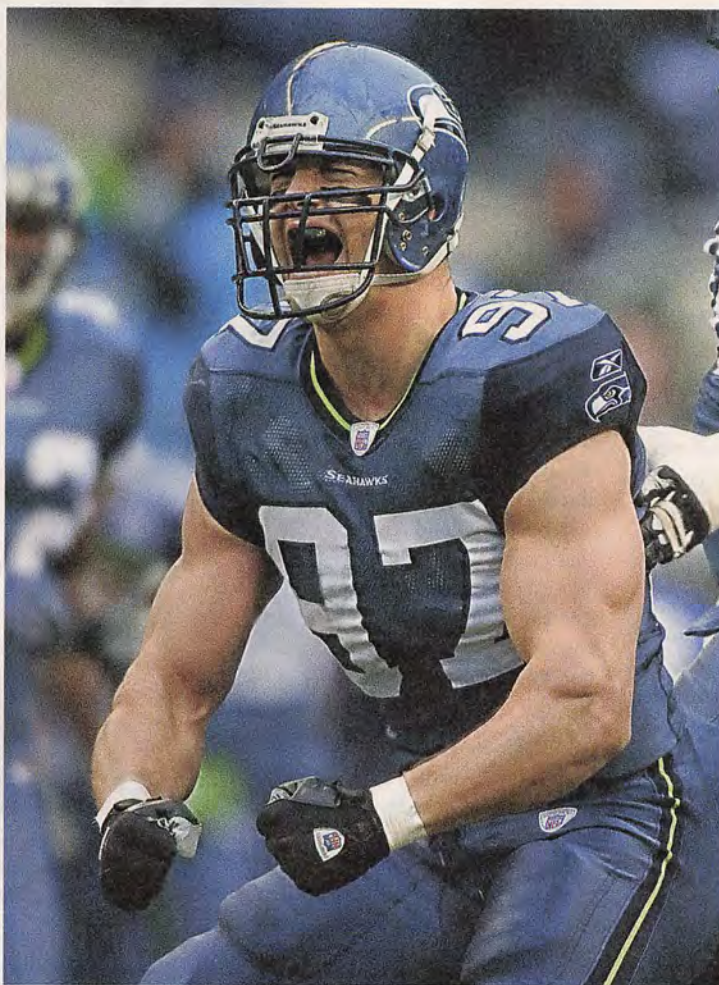
3 Vikings Jared Allen, acquired in a trade after leading the NFL in sacks last season, single-handedly makes this position a strength for the Vikings. Ray Edwards isn't a bad pass rusher, and backup Brian Robison had 4½ sacks last year.

4 Seahawks Patrick Kerney had his best season in 2007, and his relentless style energizes the defense. Darryl Tapp had some good moments last year but needs to be more consistent to hold off rookie Lawrence Jackson.

5 Eagles Trent Cole has a nonstop motor and made the Pro Bowl last season. Juqua Parker is an excellent run stopper but lacks consistency rushing the passer. Several young players could add pass-rush help in the nickel.

6 Cowboys Chris Canty is ready to emerge as a star after a strong 2007 season. Marcus Spears needs to be more productive to solidify his starting spot. Jason Hatcher needs to stay healthy. He's the unit's best pure pass rusher.

7 Saints Will Smith has a nice combination of power and finesse. So does Charles Grant, but he needs to re-establish himself after an off year. Newcomer Bobby McCray, a speedy pass-rush specialist, will help the rotation.



Last season, Kerney had 14½ sacks—the highest total of his nine-year career—and an interception.

8 Bears Alex Brown, a smart player and strong run stuffer, has reclaimed his starting job from Mark Anderson, who moves to a situational pass-rush role. Adewale Ogunleye is solid all-around on the other side.

9 Redskins Andre Carter showed quickness, power and a relentless effort in '07 while putting up 10½ sacks. Phillip Daniels stands his ground against the run but lacks push as a pass rusher. Depth is a problem.

10 Cardinals Darnell Dockett and Antonio Smith are solid, but there is room for growth. Dockett had nine sacks in 2007 but wore down. Rookies Calais Campbell and Kenny Iwebema will bolster the rotation.

11 Bucs Look for second-year players Gaines Adams and Greg White, who had 14 sacks combined last year, to continue to improve as the season progresses. Backups Kevin Carter and Marques Douglas still have something to offer.

12 Rams This should be a much-improved unit if Leonard Little stays healthy and rookie Chris Long gets immediate results with his relentless style. James Hall, a starter last year, provides solid depth.

13 Falcons With 10 sacks last year, John Abraham showed he can still be effective. The team will try to find better ways to use the speed of Jamaal Anderson, who was sackless in '07. Chauncey Davis is a reliable backup.

14 49ers Newcomer Justin Smith (6-4, 275) may be a little light to play end in a 3-4, but he should make up for it with tenacity. Isaac Sopoaga will get the first crack at the other end job ahead of rookie Kentwan Balmer.

15 Panthers Which Julius Peppers will show up? If it's the one who had 2½ sacks last year, the Panthers are in

trouble. Raiders washout Tyler Brayton, Charles Johnson and Stanley McGlover will compete for time.

16 Lions Dewayne White is Detroit's only consistent pass-rush threat. On the other side, the team will rotate veteran Jared DeVries and second-year player Ikaika Alama-Francis, who remains too raw to be consistent.

TOP
5

1. Jared Allen, Vikings
2. Patrick Kerney, Seahawks
3. Osi Umenyiora, Giants
4. Trent Cole, Eagles
5. Aaron Kampman, Packers

INSIDE THE AFC

Bad news for QBs: Merriman plans to get even better

Shawne Merriman believes 2007 was his best all-around season: He made more plays in coverage and forced teams to adjust their game plans. Still, the Chargers' three-time Pro Bowler wasn't satisfied with his sacks total (12½), and he's working to improve his size-speed combination. In offseason workouts, he looks more cut. Merriman believes there isn't much more offenses can throw at him with blocking schemes, and he plans to reel in more quarterbacks.

BALTIMORE After shuffling linemen during minicamps, the Ravens seem to like Jason Brown at center, Ben Grubbs at left guard and Marshal Yanda at right guard. All three played different positions last season. This lineup gives the Ravens more agility and better perimeter blocking.

BUFFALO WR James Hardy is spending extra time working with QB Trent Edwards—at Hardy's request. Look for Hardy to become a red zone threat because of his 6-6 frame, long arms and leaping ability.

CINCINNATI FB Jeremi Johnson's days as a starter could be numbered because of weight issues and backup TE Daniel Coats' development as a fullback. Johnson (5-11, 260) has excellent size and strength, but his off-field work habits are lacking.

CLEVELAND If QB Derek Anderson progresses as expected, WR Braylon Edwards should have a monster year. Edwards was running around OTAs like a frisky colt, showing off his size, speed and athleticism. Two issues: He drops too many balls and needs to be tougher in traffic.

DENVER Rookie WR Eddie Royal has made a big first impression. Royal has showed speed, quickness, an ability to grasp the offense and better-than-expected hands. He'll push for playing time in the slot.

HOUSTON Newcomer Chaun Thompson, while focusing on learning his responsibilities at linebacker, is also joining the linemen for drills during OTAs. In passing situations, the Texans likely will use Thompson as an edge rusher—something he did with the Browns.

INDIANAPOLIS Veteran MLB Gary Brackett has been limited by minor hip surgery, but he's expected to be ready for the season. Brackett isn't one of the league's elite linebackers, but he's a tenacious tackler who's a good fit in the team's cover 2 because of his excellent range in coverage.

JACKSONVILLE OT Richard Collier, an undrafted rookie in 2006, could work himself into the starting lineup. Collier (6-7, 345) has good

mobility for his size and a mean streak the staff loves. Because of off-field issues, starting LT Khalif Barnes will be closely scrutinized.

KANSAS CITY The Chiefs like Rudy Niswanger's ability and are giving him the first shot to start at center. He is a good athlete who played well in limited time at guard last season before tearing knee ligaments. The Chiefs also signed veteran Wade Smith as an option.

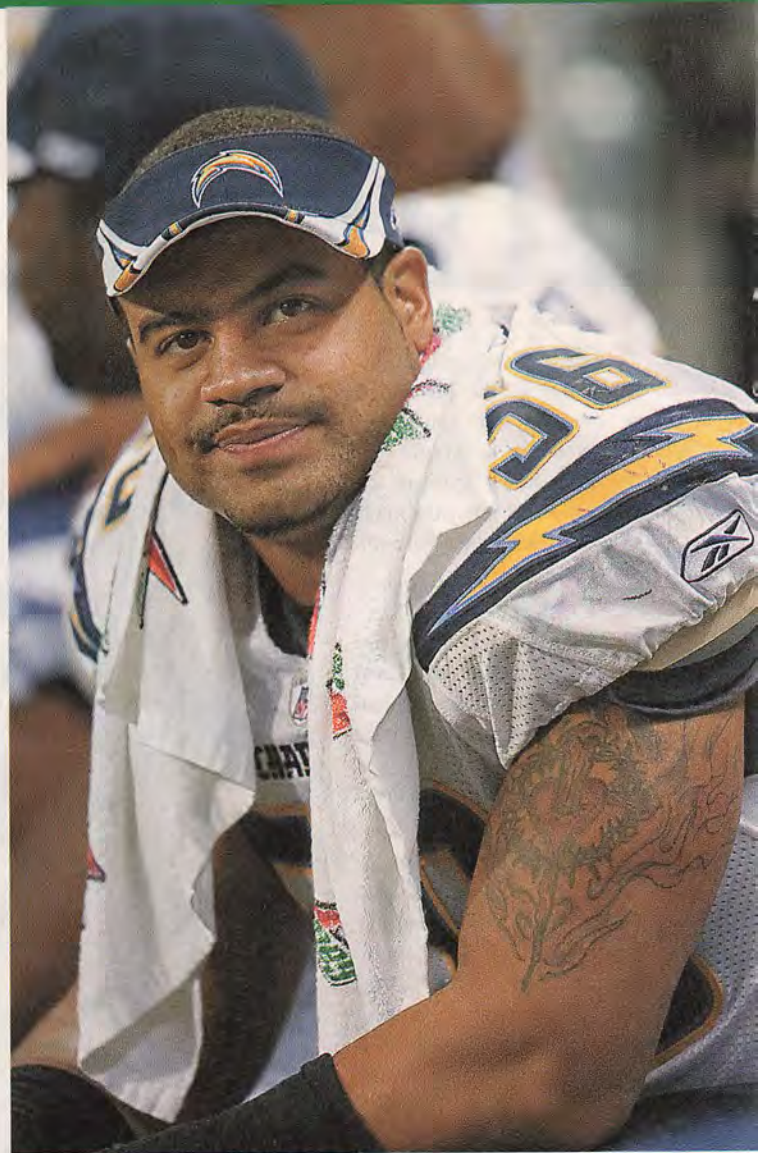
MIAMI New TE Anthony Fasano has a terrific work ethic. What he lacks in athleticism and power he makes up for with a feisty style that makes him tough to bring down. If Fasano develops lower-body strength to enhance his blocking, watch for him to move quickly up the depth chart.

NEW YORK WR Brad Smith has been slowed by a back problem, which comes at a bad time for him. Smith, a former college quarterback, has shown flashes since being converted to wideout, but he's approaching the make or break point and needs all the reps he can get.

NEW ENGLAND The team made an intriguing move by putting veteran S Tank Williams at linebacker. Though he's only 223 pounds, Williams has the toughness to play there. His speed would allow him to take the field against three- and four-wide receiver sets.

OAKLAND If veteran pickup Ed Hartwell fares well in the middle during camp, the Raiders will move Kirk Morrison to the strong side. They be-

CORRESPONDENTS: Baltimore, Mike Preston; Buffalo, Allen Wilson; Cincinnati, Chick Ludwig; Cleveland, Steve Doerschuk; Denver, Lee Rasizer; Houston, Megan Manfull; Indianapolis, Mike Chappell; Jacksonville, Michael C. Wright; Kansas City, Adam Teicher; Miami, Jeff Darlington; New England, John Tomase; New York, J.P. Pelzman; Oakland, Steve Corkran; Pittsburgh, Gerry Dulac; San Diego, Kevin Acee; Tennessee, Jim Wyatt.



Not only is Merriman getting bigger and badder, his quarterback-chasing motor apparently is revving up.

lieve moving Morrison would bolster the linebacking unit—the team currently lacks a good option on the strong side—and take advantage of his coverage skills.

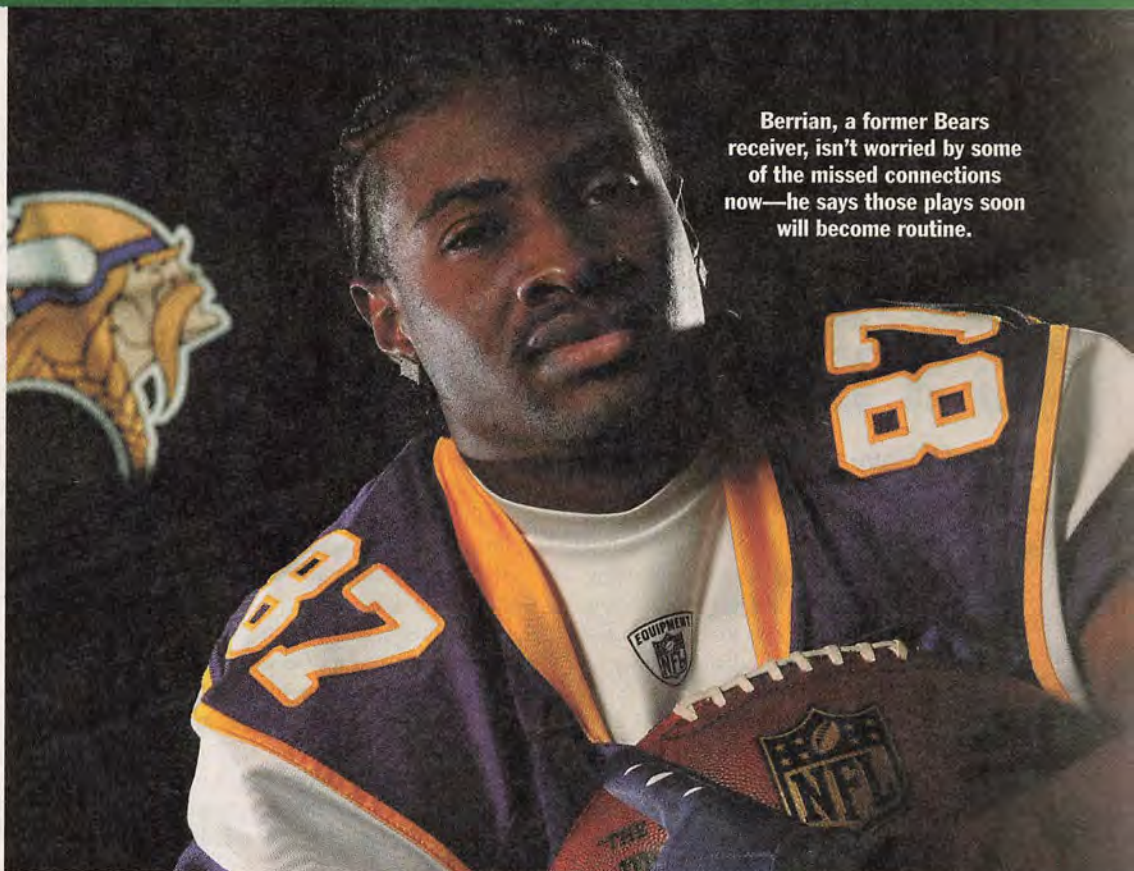
PITTSBURGH Don't expect rookie OLB Bruce Davis to play a lot despite suggestions he could see time in pass-rush situations. Davis is quick and athletic, but the team isn't going to remove either of its outside linebackers—James Harrison or LaMarr Woodley—in pass-rush situations.

TENNESSEE With Albert Haynesworth absent from OTAs, the Titans are giving rookie DT Jason Jones a long look. Jones, who has good instincts, needs to add strength and eliminate his tendency to put his head down while rushing the passer. He is expected to work at end and tackle this season.

INSIDE THE **NFC**

The Vikings are looking to make a deep connection with Berrian

The timing between Vikings QB Tarvaris Jackson and new No. 1 WR Bernard Berrian is a work in progress. Berrian says they are on the same page on short and intermediate routes—it's the long balls that still need work. Berrian's deep speed and ability to get separation should make a significant difference in the passing game.



Berrian, a former Bears receiver, isn't worried by some of the missed connections now—he says those plays soon will become routine.

ARIZONA TE Ben Patrick has been impressive in offseason drills and could challenge Leonard Pope for the starting role. Patrick has good speed and catches the ball well, but he needs to improve his blocking skills.

ATLANTA If rookie Curtis Lofton comes along fast enough to start at middle linebacker, the team will move Keith Brooking back to the weak side, his preferred position. Lofton doesn't have blazing speed but anchors well against the run and can deliver big hits.

CAROLINA QB Jake Delhomme increased his workload during the first week of OTAs, taking snaps with the first team for the first time. Delhomme, recovering from elbow surgery last October, looked crisp and made all the throws. He should be cleared for full work in training camp.

CHICAGO Devin Hester's transition to offense, which began a year ago, is picking up steam. He spent considerable time with the first team during a recent minicamp. He could emerge as the No. 1 receiver for an offense starved for a playmaker.

DALLAS OLB Greg Ellis is unhappy the Cowboys reduced his practice time during OTAs to give second-year player Anthony Spencer more work. The team wants to give Spencer every chance to learn so he can be more of a factor in 2008, but the Cowboys deny they are phasing out Ellis.

DETROIT Even after the acquisition of CBs Leigh Bodden and Brian Kelly, backup Keith Smith is showing he might be the team's best

on-ball defender. But Smith won't be a starter until he proves he can handle the run-support duties of a cover 2 cornerback.

GREEN BAY DT Justin Harrell's back injury is preventing him from getting much-needed offseason work. He was raw and ineffective last year and needed to refine his game in the offseason. Harrell will be out until training camp, and the injury damages his chances of starting.

NEW ORLEANS New backup QB Mark Brunell has looked comfortable and fluid, throwing with precision and decent arm strength. Brunell appears significantly ahead of Tyler Palko in the competition for the No. 2 job.

NEW YORK The starting offensive line is expected to return intact, which leaves no room for OT Guy Whimper to break into the lineup. The team says he has the footwork to play left tackle, but he must be more consistent and dedicated.

PHILADELPHIA QB Kevin Kolb threw crisp deep balls and short passes and appeared in complete command of the huddle in a recent minicamp. It would be considered a step back in his development if he failed to beat out A.J. Feeley for the No. 2 job.

ST. LOUIS After showing flashes of playmaking skills in coverage the past two seasons, CB Ron

Bartell could be on the verge of a breakthrough year. He has good size (6-1, 205) and speed but will have to beat out Fakhir Brown or Tye Hill to win a starting job.

SAN FRANCISCO The team plans to shift second-round pick Chilo Rachal from right guard to right tackle during OTAs with the hope he can back up Jonas Jennings. Rachal has long arms and good height, and he showed quick feet during the team's recent minicamp.

SEATTLE Rookie DT Red Bryant, like second-year DT Brandon Mebane, knows how to use his size (6-5, 328) to clog running lanes. Bryant, also like Mebane, can force double-team blocks and beat opponents one-on-one. The question: Can Bryant develop into a starter like Mebane did in '07?

TAMPA BAY TE John Gilmore should figure prominently in the team's two-tight end sets. He is a superb run blocker with good hand technique, leverage and a quick first step. But he needs work on his route running.

WASHINGTON SS Reed Doughty is a solid starter, and it is difficult to imagine him losing his job to one of the rookies—Chris Horton or Kareem Moore—on the depth chart. Doughty is not a standout in coverage, but he's strong against the run and has the speed to stay with tight ends.

CORRESPONDENTS: Arizona, Kent Somers; Atlanta, D. Orlando Ledbetter; Carolina, Darin Gantt; Chicago, Brad Biggs; Dallas, Jean-Jacques Taylor; Detroit, Tom Kowalski; Green Bay, Tom Silverstein; Minnesota, Don Seeholzer; New Orleans, Mike Triplett; New York, Paul Schwartz; Philadelphia, Geoff Mosher; St. Louis, Jim Thomas; San Francisco, Matt Barrows; Seattle, Clare Farnsworth; Tampa Bay, Roy Cummings; Washington, Paul Woody.

Which nonconference game will be the biggest factor in the national title race? You can focus on five.

A trip to Tempe is a trap for Georgia

By Matt Hayes

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There's this great little website called MapGameDay.com, where those running the site—admittedly, the first group of guys I've seen sicker than I am about the sport—meticulously mapped out the history of miles traveled for road games.

Or, in some cases, a lack thereof.

It is here where we introduce Georgia, the team that will grace the cover of *SPORTING NEWS*' college football yearbook later this month. The Dawgs are our No. 1, and we're not ashamed of it.

Only maybe we should have put more stock into this unusual road Georgia will travel. According to MapGameDay.com, the Dawgs have traveled all of 358 miles for nonconference games in the regular season since 1998. The good folks in Athens can't confirm this because, frankly, what kind of mind thinks of such statistical concepts?

Georgia's trip to Tempe, Ariz., in the first month of the season has to be the top nonconference game this fall—if for no other reason than it could be the first big upset of the year.

The Dawgs will travel almost 1,900 miles one way to play at Arizona State, more than five times the miles they traveled for nonconference road games the past 10 years. Georgia hasn't been west of the Central time zone in the regular season since 1960, a 10-3 loss to—you guessed it—a Pac-10 team.

USC beat Georgia 48 years ago in the fourth week of the season, and the Dawgs travel to Tempe this fall in—this is so rich—the fourth week of the season.

The top five nonconference games, all of which will have a major impact on the national title race:

1. Georgia at Arizona State, September 20. A fact few have realized from Arizona State's 10-win season last fall: The first time the Sun Devils played a team of significance, they lost to Oregon. The

second time, to USC. The third, to Texas.

What in the world makes anyone think this Arizona State team, with a revamped offensive line, can bang heads with Georgia, which has one of the best defensive lines in the nation? Here's one reason: Ubertalented Dawgs quarterback Matthew Stafford struggles in true road games and still must embrace the concept of incompletions instead of interceptions.

2. Ohio State at USC, September 13. Since 2002, both USC and Ohio State are 21-1 in regular season nonconference games. USC lost to Kansas State, Ohio State to Texas.

For all we know in the tenuous tizzy that is poll voting, this game could be No. 1 vs. No. 2 when it kicks off in prime time. And if Ohio State wins, everyone swallow hard and choke down this stark realization: No one is beating the Buckeyes in 2008.

That means another championship game with Ohio State, complete with two weeks of Big Ten bashing and SEC idolatry—because, of course, Georgia will be on the other sideline.

3. Auburn at West Virginia, October 23. Imagine this conversation, if you will:

Auburn athletic director Jay Jacobs: "We've set up a game at West Virginia."

Auburn coach Tommy Tuberville: "Western Michigan?"

Jacobs: "And it's a Thursday night game."

And Tubs thought a megalomaniac booster was his only issue. Let's look at this for what it is: a foolish statement of bravado by the Auburn administration.

If the Tigers win, well, they should have. And if they lose—Thursday night, Morgantown; you do the math—well, they're just overrated.

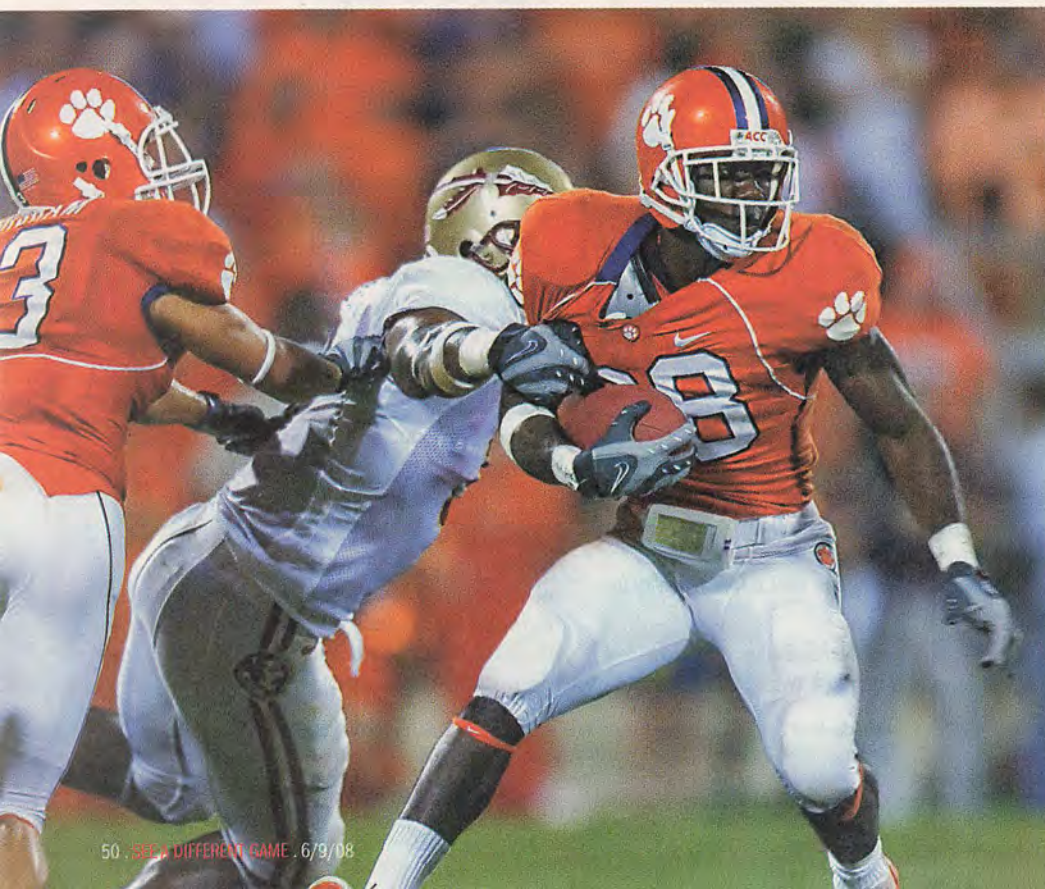
Before we jump on the coach Stew Iovettrain at WVU, remember that no team gave the Mountaineers more problems the past two years than South Florida. The Bulls' defensive premise is lateral speed and physical safeties playing big in run support. In other words, just like an Auburn defense that will be among the best in the nation.

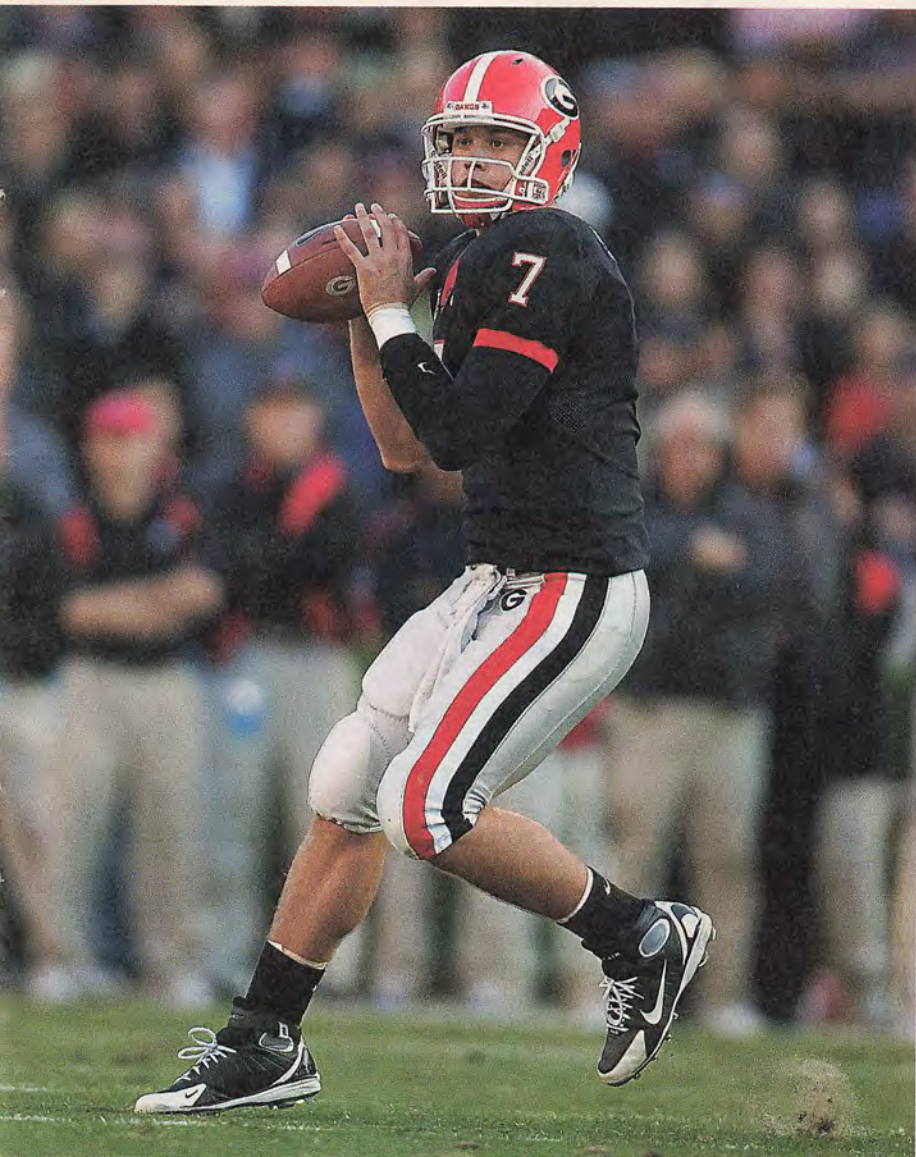
4. Illinois vs. Missouri, August 30. Gary Pinkel summed up his coaching acumen best after Missouri's thrilling win over Kansas last season: "It's funny how much better of a coach you are when you've got players."

Meanwhile, Ron Zook just landed another five-star recruit to Illinois. And the team that couldn't get out of its own way two years ago isn't too far away from playing for it all now.

Unfortunately, this Week 1 BCS elimination game will be played in St. Louis—in a dome, in a baseball town and in a city that wouldn't know the sweet scent of college football from the stench of

Clemson has many offensive weapons but must use Spiller more to be a big-time threat.





Stafford gets into trouble at times when he forces the ball into spots he shouldn't.

toasted ravioli.

5. Alabama vs. Clemson, August 30. These are strange times in Clemson. The Tigers are hot, a loaded team primed for the unthinkable despite a recent enigmatic history.

The ACC is down and Clemson has the league's best offense—despite the fact that a certain player was misused the past two years. And because this “neutral site” game (word is Bama fans will scoop up tickets in Atlanta) will be the toughest of the season for the Tigers, I'm here to help by scripting the first three plays:

1. Zone read option to tailback C.J. Spiller.
2. Bubble screen to tailback C.J. Spiller.
3. Power isolation to tailback C.J. Spiller.

Repeat in heavy doses.

Is that so tough to understand? It's certainly easier than counting miles on a road map. **SN**

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

Matt Hayes ranks the nation's best players by position, starting with offense, at sportingnews.com.

speedreads

Joe Paterno says he's tired of “bogus excuses” for the lack of a national playoff. Yeah, well, I'm tired of Joe's bogus excuses for why he stopped one of the best rivalries in the game (Penn State-Pitt). Now we're even, Pops.

If Florida State continues its free fall and iconic coach Bobby Bowden gets out after this season, I'm paying the \$2.5 million buyout to coach-in-waiting Jimbo Fisher and finding someone else. That's a small price to blow up things and try a fresh approach to fix this once-proud program.

Think about this: There are eight coaches in the SEC who make at least \$2 million a year. And Steve Spurrier isn't one of them.

> INSIDE DISH

An Alameda County judge has until June 18 to make a decision on a lawsuit filed against the University of California and its facilities expansion plans that include

cutting down many 100-year-old oak trees near the football stadium. Should Cal lose in court, it could lose on the field. Although coach **Jeff Tedford** has been loyal to Cal because the university gave him his first job, it would be easier for other schools to pry him away from Berkeley if the university must find alternative plans for desperately needed facilities upgrades. > The SEC's push for an early signing date has a chance to be approved by the NCAA. If it does, the date likely will be in early fall, possibly September 1, according to sources on the NCAA executive committee. A September date would all but eliminate late recruiting pitches and coaches' poaching committed recruits from other schools. > Even though new Washington State coach **Paul Wulff** was briefed on the school's potential academic shortcomings before he accepted the job last December—and will be given leeway because of it—few could've imagined that the program would lose eight scholarships because it failed to meet the NCAA's Academic Progress Rate standards for the past four years. Now, the latest hurdle: Star recruit QB **Calvin Schmittke**—the foundation of Wulff's reclamation at his alma mater—had his scholarship revoked before he played a down because of off-field issues. Wulff made tiny Eastern Washington relevant in the Championship Subdivision on a limited athletic budget. Given time, he'll do the same at Wazzu. > **Rick Neuheisel** got another assist from his son in landing a quarterback for UCLA. It was **Jerry Neuheisel**, Rick's oldest son, who first saw incoming UCLA freshman **Kevin Prince** at a quarterbacks camp and told Neuheisel that Prince, not one of the more highly regarded quarterbacks, was the best player at the camp. UCLA received a commitment last week from four-star QB **Richard Brehaut** after the elder Neuheisel saw him throw at a quarterbacks camp in Santa Barbara. Neuheisel was allowed to attend the camp because Jerry was competing. He saw Brehaut throw at the camp and offered him a scholarship soon after.

Some guys who aren't first-round locks for the draft have decisions to make. The choice isn't always so obvious.

Not everyone leaves this camp happy

By Ryan Fagan

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The big names, the 15 guys who are pretty much first-round locks, were in Orlando for the NBA's predraft camp mainly just to talk—and get poked and prodded a bit.

For the other 64 guys at Disney's Milk House gym, this was an opportunity to show they belonged. Some were trying to prove they deserve a spot in the first round. For others, the goal was to prove they are draft-worthy. A complicated mathematical calculation ($64 + 15 = 79$) tells us that not everybody who showed up will be among the 60 players drafted.

For those players with college eligibility remaining, though, a tough decision is looming—June 16 is the withdrawal deadline. They can go forward with their draft hopes, or they can put off their NBA dreams, go back to school for at least another season and help shape the NCAA Tournament. An NBA scout's take on some such players:

Wayne Ellington, SG, North Carolina

Scout's take: "He's done some things well, but he's been really inconsistent. I'm not sure he's played himself up—not into the first round for sure—so I would think he'll go back."

Danny Green, SG, North Carolina

Scout's take: "His ankle's been banged up pretty good. He hasn't looked horrible out there, but you can tell he's been limited. He came into this camp and wanted to overwhelm us, but with the injury—and it's not like he hid it, which is good—I think his odds of going back probably increased."

Richard Hendrix, PF, Alabama

Scout's take: "He rebounds, he's strong and always cleans up



Vaden (right) and Gonzaga's Jeremy Pargo probably aren't going to get first-round guarantees, but that doesn't mean going back to school is a given.

around the paint. He's got good touch. Everybody knocks him for his size (6-9, 255), but if expectations are realistic, I think whoever gets him will be happy. He's pretty much guaranteed second round and probably early."

Ty Lawson, PG, North Carolina

Scout's take: "He came in against Lester Hudson (Tennessee-Martin) and shut him down, and Hudson's pretty tough off the dribble. Then he did a good job of getting into the lane and scoring. His jump shot's the one thing that's not all the way there yet. Of all the Carolina guys, he's the one who helped himself out most."

Luc Richard Mbah a Moute, PF, UCLA

Scout's take: "He's shown the ability to guard the twos and threes, which is surprising with how big (6-8, 232) he is. He's not just long, he's got great lateral movement, stays in front of guys and does a little bit of everything. I'm not sure if he'll stay in, but a lot of teams would be happy to take him in the second round."

Robert Vaden, SG, UAB

Scout's take: "He's got really good size (6-5, 207) at the two and can really stroke it. He has that really high release point, gets up on the jump shot. He's a guy you could see coming in and being a rotation-type guy. He's a solid second-round guy." **SN**



ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

Get more on players who participated at the predraft camp at sportingnews.com.

speedread

There were few things I despised more as a kid than helping to clean the house. Always felt better when we were done, though, especially when we used enough elbow grease to get out the tough stains. You agree, don't you, Tom Crean?



Funny how an outstanding recruiting class can smooth over a couple of rough seasons. Rutgers coach **Fred Hill** was given an extension through the 2012-13 season after landing the No. 7 class in the Big East, which includes local player **Mike Rosario**, a 6-2 shooting guard from St. Anthony High (Jersey City, N.J.). Rivals.com ranks Rosario as the No. 55 player in the class of 2008. ➤ Notre Dame got another building block when former Purdue F **Scott Martin** announced he will join the program. He and former Mississippi State G **Ben Hansbrough** won't be eligible until the 2009-10 season. If G **Tory Jackson** and F **Luke Harangody** stick around for their senior seasons, the Irish will have a starting group that won't take a back seat to anyone in experience. ➤ Memphis SG **Antonio Anderson**'s decision to pull out of the draft was a good one. He's a solid all-around player but can significantly improve his stock by playing a bigger role in the Tigers' offense next season.

Chip Ganassi Racing hasn't won big in NASCAR and won't anytime soon. The team's current drivers just aren't ready.

His Cup is empty

By Bob Pockrass

Chip Ganassi Racing added another Borg-Warner trophy to its collection when Scott Dixon won the Indianapolis 500 and joined Emerson Fittipaldi and Juan Pablo Montoya as drivers who have won the world's biggest automobile race for the team.

Ganassi also has won five open-wheel championships, including four consecutive titles with three drivers (Jimmy Vasser, Alex Zanardi and Montoya) from 1996-99. Additionally, Ganassi drivers have ruled one of the premier road racing events, winning the last three Rolex 24 At Daytona sportscar events.

And all of that success has bled into the Ganassi NASCAR program.

Uh, stop right there.

Chip Ganassi hasn't been able to correlate success in other forms of racing into his NASCAR program, and it's got to eat at the guy who loves to win and hates to finish second.



Montoya is trying to get up to speed despite working with his fourth crew chief in two seasons.

He purchased the bulk of Sabco Racing from Felix Sabates in 2001 and was in contention for a Cup title in 2002 before Sterling Marlin was injured in a crash. Since 2002, Ganassi has had only one win—Montoya's last year as a Cup rookie at Infineon Raceway—in 585 starts.

So where has Ganassi gone wrong?

You might think he just doesn't have the right people in his NASCAR organization, but he has had good people.

Team manager Tony Glover was a successful

crew chief, and crew chief Donnie Wingo had decent seasons with Jamie McMurray and Casey Mears, two drivers who haven't done any better since leaving the organization. Former team manager Andy Graves is doing a solid job as Toyota's Sprint Cup program manager.

More recently, Ganassi brought in former Dodge executive John Fernandez and former Roush Fenway Racing and Dale Earnhardt Inc. jack-of-all-trades Steve Hmiel. Both have been entrenched in racing for decades but have yet to

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give the organization the shot in the arm for improved results.

Do you blame Ganassi for not having better drivers?

Ganassi says he has drivers the caliber of Kyle Busch and Jimmie Johnson in his cars in the other series and that he expects Montoya to eventually reach that level in NASCAR. But this isn't about whether Ganassi's teams challenge for a title right now. He shouldn't worry about Kyle Busch and Jimmie Johnson. He needs to worry about his drivers being competitive with the likes of Kasey Kahne, Martin Truex and Clint Bowyer—guys who compete for wins occasionally, run well consistently, vie for Chase contention and would be considered at least minimal threats to win the title if they make the Chase.

Right now, Montoya is the only one close to that status. What has happened with Reed Sorenson is puzzling. He showed great promise, winning a Busch Series race in just his 11th career start in 2005 before moving up to Cup in 2006. He made progress in 2007 but hasn't made a jump like a guy such as David Ragan, who went from struggling rookie to Chase contender in one year.

The Dario Franchitti experiment has not gone as well as hoped (although expectations should have been minimal). He fell outside the top 35 in points, got injured and missed valuable track time. Franchitti, last year's Indy 500 and IndyCar Series champ, still needs a sponsor.

It's too easy to say Ganassi will eventually get to the level where his teams can compete consistently with NASCAR's big boys. That should have happened by now. That it hasn't will continue to gnaw at him and perplex the auto racing world. **SN**

Bob Pockrass is an associate editor for NASCAR Scene. Read more from Pockrass at scenedaily.com.

speedreads

Juan Pablo Montoya in a Joe Gibbs car if Tony Stewart bolts? Montoya would enjoy as much success at JGR as Dale Earnhardt Jr. has at Hendrick Motorsports.

I don't understand why Gillett Evernham Motorsports extended Elliott Sadler's contract. Perhaps that's an admission the organization can't get anyone better.

If Bruton Smith buys Dover, it would be his third track purchase in the past year. I have no idea what his plans are, but it will be fun finding out. —Roger Kuznia



> INSIDE DISH

If you think the media were the only ones focused on the debut of **Joey Logano** in last Saturday's Nationwide Series race at Dover, you'd be as wrong as the concrete track at Dover is hard. One week after turning 18 and becoming eligible to race in NASCAR's top three national series, Logano finished sixth Saturday, earning himself respect and Joe Gibbs Racing teammate **Denny Hamlin** \$200 in addition to the purse he got for winning the race. Hamlin had made side bets with **Kyle Busch** and **Michael Waltrip** that Logano would finish in the top seven. Logano had the most green flag passes, 26, in the race and was passed under the green only four times. > Sunday's Sprint Cup race at Dover marked the midway point of the regular season—13 races remain before the Chase field is set after Richmond in September. **Matt Kenseth**, who

Kenseth knows about comebacks—he was 320 points out of the cutoff spot with 12 races to go in 2005 and rallied to make the Chase.

posted his third consecutive top 10 finish last weekend, is the driver with the hottest hand. Kenseth didn't move up in the standings after Dover—he remained 16th—but he did go from 190 points out of 12th, the last Chase-eligible position, to 95 out. Four races ago, Kenseth was 22nd in the standings, 204 points out of 12th. Kenseth and **Jimmie Johnson** are the only drivers to qualify for each Chase since the format was adopted in 2004. > If Speedway Motorsports Inc. chairman **Bruton Smith** buys another track to plunder a Sprint Cup date, it will have to be Dover. Forget the talk that Pocono Raceway is for sale. Pocono owner **Joseph Mattioli** says the track is in a trust that eventually will go to his grandchildren. "My three kids get all the money, until they die," says Mattioli, 83. "When they die, everything goes to their seven children. What else can I say? My children are only 50 years old, so they're going to live 20 or 30 years, so after 30 years, (the grandchildren) are going to get it. If Bruton's still living, they might sell it to him. Tell him the price is going to be a son of a gun." Smith is 81.

Junior needs a win—have you noticed?

When your name is Dale Earnhardt Jr., everything you do is magnified. Your wins. Your losses. Your nightclub openings.

When Junior changed teams last year, the announcement was carried live on national television. When he unveiled the colors and sponsors of his new car, it was more of the same.

That's one of the benefits of being Dale Earnhardt Jr. All news is big news.

But there's a downside. All bad news also is big news.

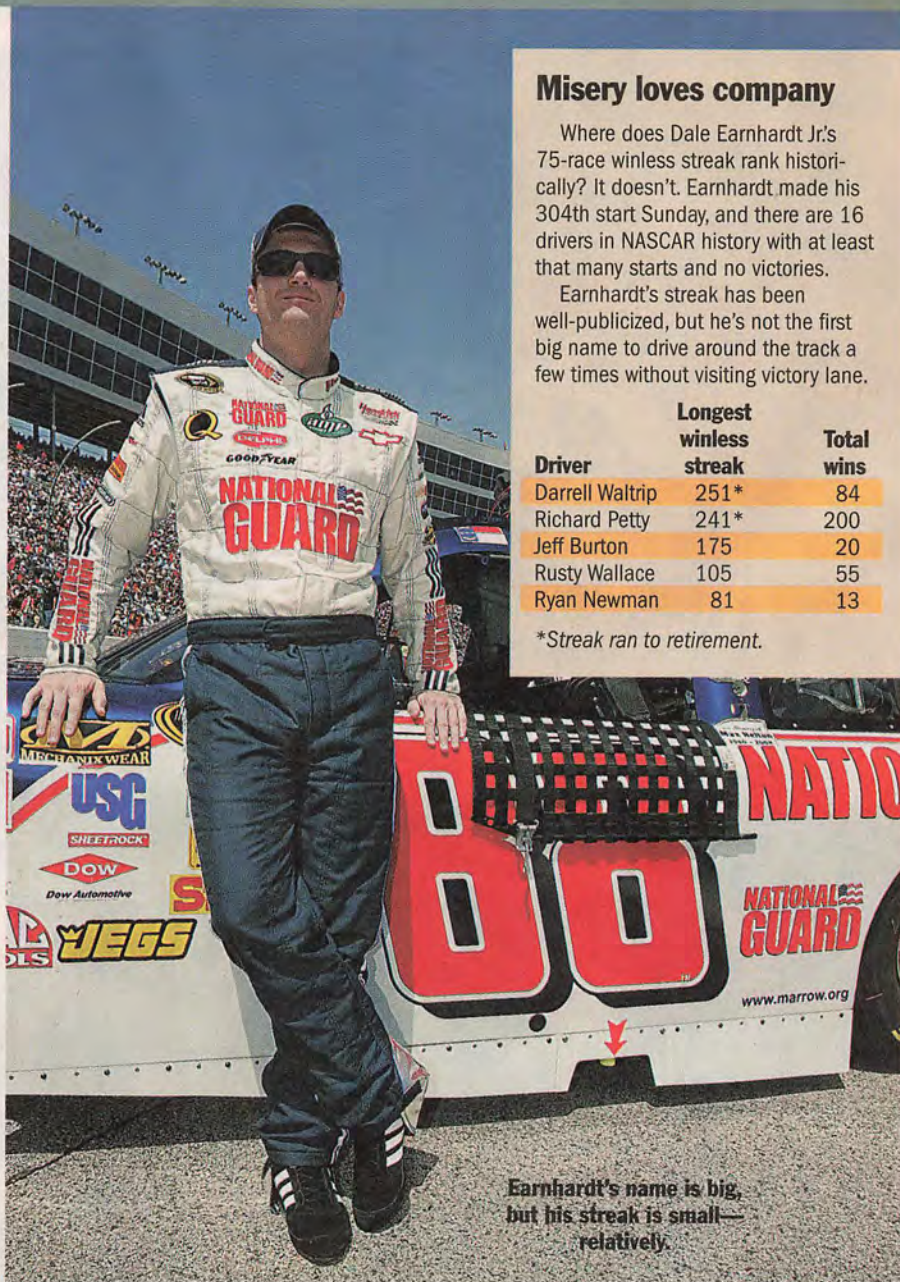
Which brings us to his winless streak: It reached 75 races with his 35th-place finish last Sunday at Dover. (His dad's longest drought was 59.)

But before we get to that, let's focus on the positive. Earnhardt has 17 career Cup victories. In the 60 years of the sport, only 38 drivers have more. You could fill who knows how many short tracks with the drivers who have fewer wins at NASCAR's highest level.

Earnhardt's winless streak isn't even the longest among active drivers. Kyle Petty last won 13 years ago this week. That's 423 races and counting. Bobby Labonte, who won the 2000 Cup championship, is winless in 157 races. Robby Gordon's drought is at 170 and Michael Waltrip's at 162 races. Elliott Sadler, at 33 the same age as Earnhardt, is winless in 132.

But none is named Earnhardt, son of a seven-time champion, and that's the difference.

"I can't wait to just have that celebration we're gonna have in victory lane," Earnhardt told reporters last month in Richmond, site of his last win. "It's gonna be so much fun." —Bill Marx



Earnhardt's name is big, but his streak is small—relatively.

Misery loves company

Where does Dale Earnhardt Jr.'s 75-race winless streak rank historically? It doesn't. Earnhardt made his 304th start Sunday, and there are 16 drivers in NASCAR history with at least that many starts and no victories.

Earnhardt's streak has been well-publicized, but he's not the first big name to drive around the track a few times without visiting victory lane.

Driver	Longest winless streak	Total wins
Darrell Waltrip	251*	84
Richard Petty	241*	200
Jeff Burton	175	20
Rusty Wallace	105	55
Ryan Newman	81	13

*Streak ran to retirement.

RUSTY BURROUGHS FOR SN



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Pit Box

NASCAR experts Roger Kuznia and Reid Spencer size up the upcoming race—and each other's analysis—every week in the Pit Box. This week: the Pocono 500.

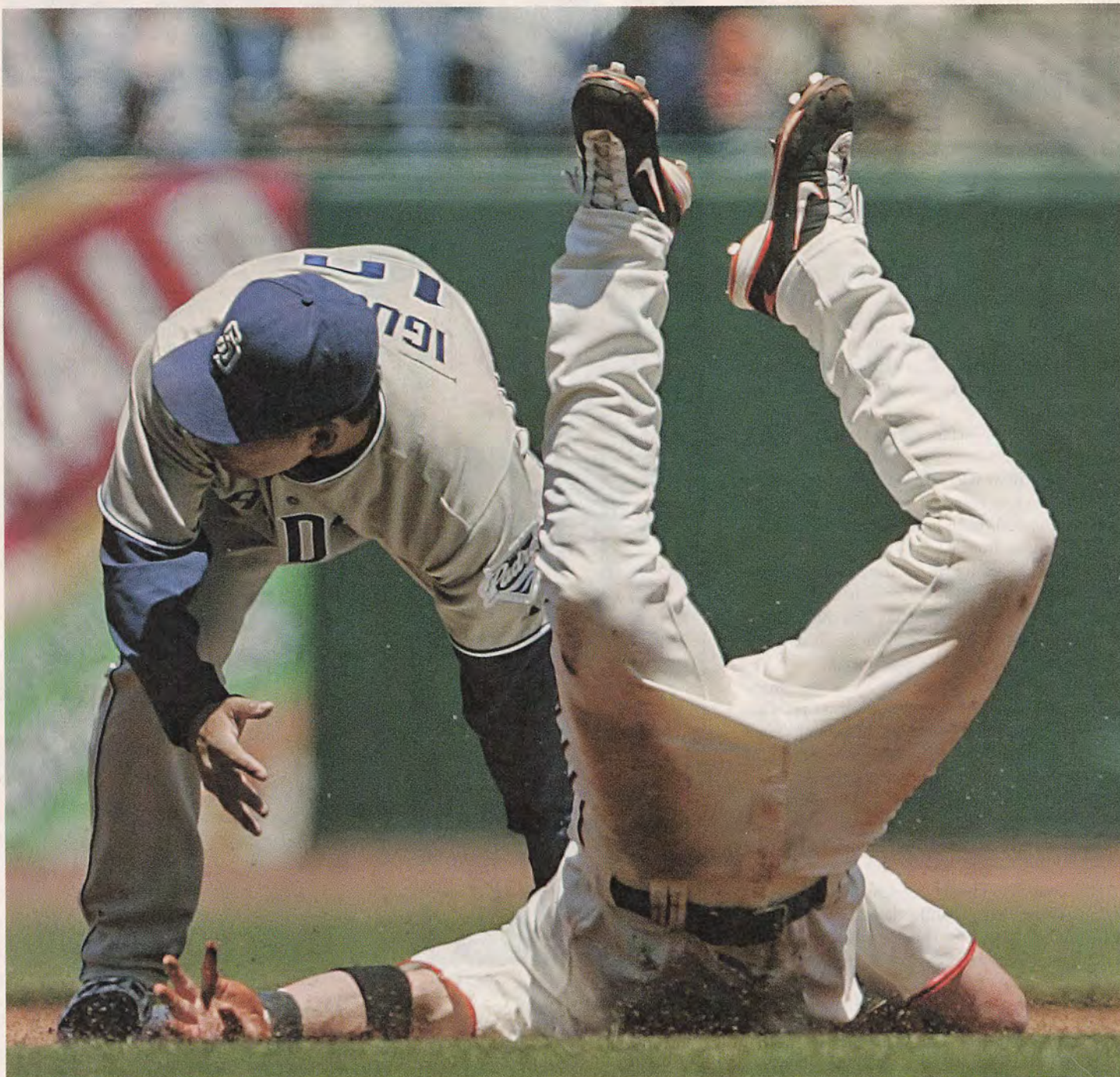
Who will win at Pocono?

1:30 p.m. ET Sunday, TNT

Roger: I'm torn between Denny Hamlin and Kyle Busch, but ultrahot Busch gets my vote. Pocono has not been Kyle's best track, but his improvement there last year, combined with this year's remarkable success, has made me believe he'll win. Busch has shown strength at other flat tracks, and his ability to qualify well at Pocono is another reason to like his chances.

Reid: When someone is on a roll, go with him. So Kasey Kahne is my horse this week. I know Kahne hasn't cracked the top 20 in his past three starts at Pocono. But this is a new year, and the drivers will compete there with the new car for the first time. Kahne had a solid test at Pocono last week, and he's still flush from the two wins at Lowe's Motor Speedway.

Last week: Reid picked Jeff Gordon (fifth) and Roger picked Matt Kenseth (fourth), but Kyle Busch got his fourth win of the season in the Best Buy 400.



[EXPOSURE]

Don't lose your head

Anyone can slide into second base, but it takes a special talent to do a face-plant like the one Giants center fielder Aaron Rowand turned in against the Padres on Sunday. Question: Is San Diego's Tadahito Iguchi turning his head to avoid Rowand's spikes or because he's trying hard not to laugh?

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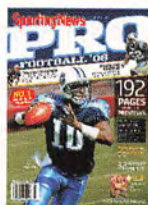
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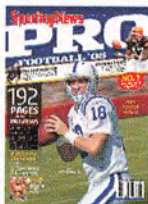
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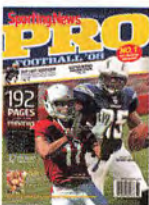
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